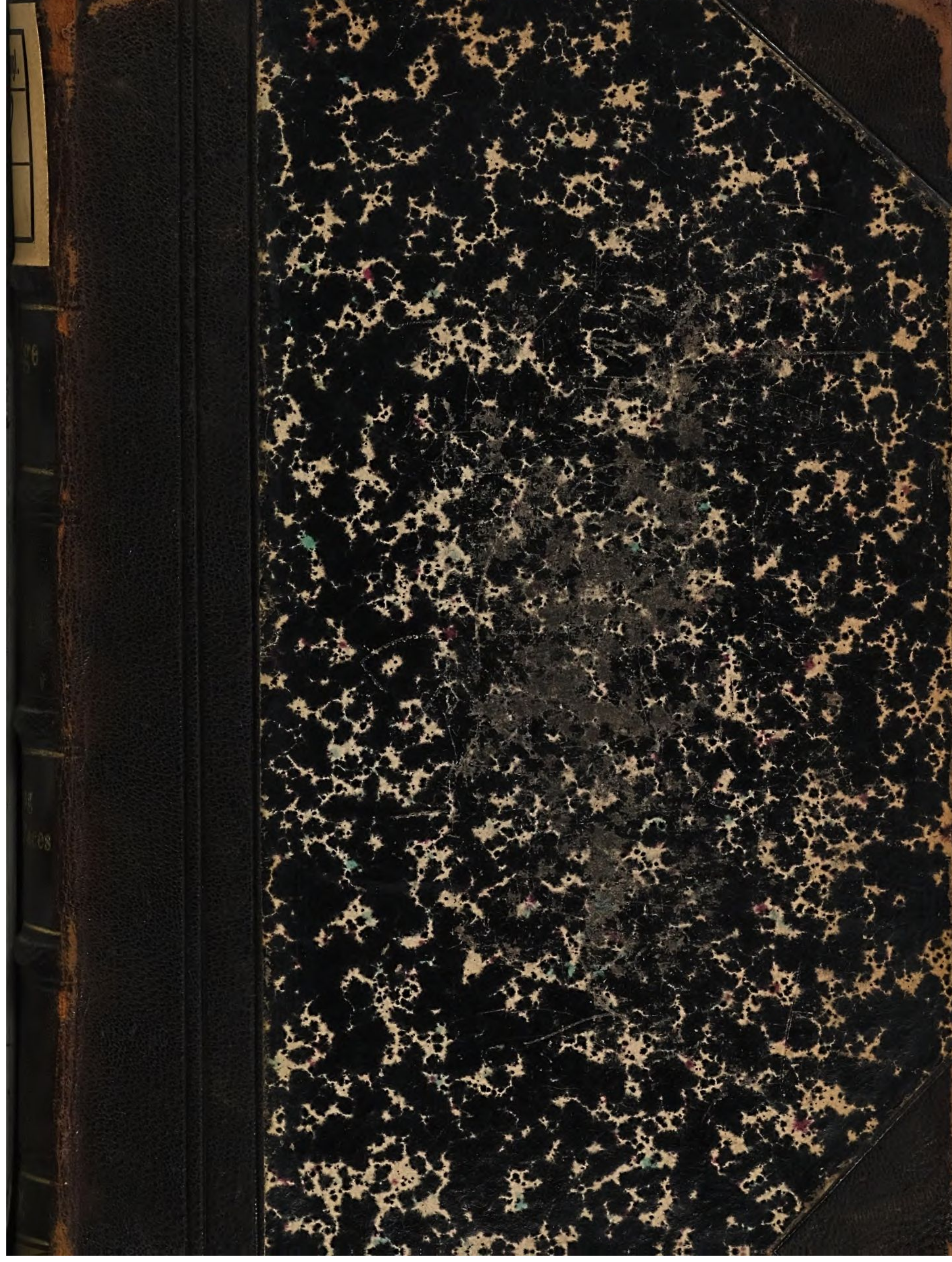




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VOL. 3272.

THE KING WITH TWO FACES.

BY
M. E. COLERIDGE.

IN TWO VOLUMES. — VOL. I.

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BERNHARD TAUCHNITZ

1898.

THE KING WITH
TWO FACES



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NOTE.

The writer owes much to MR. NISBET BAIN's most interesting work, *Gustav III. and his Contemporaries*.

THE KING WITH TWO FACES.

CHAPTER I.

IN WHICH THE HERO IS EXPECTED.

FOUR horses, saddled and bridled, stood ready.

Four loaded pistols lay on the table.

A. had a book in his hand, but he was not reading.

B. was writing a letter, but the regular scratching of his pen had ceased some time before.

C., with his hands in his pockets, was trying to sit listlessly before the fire, but he was not sitting listlessly.

D. had thrown himself on to the sofa and closed his eyes, but he was not asleep.

Very lightly and slightly, apologetically, as it were, because his ears were tired of long listening with nothing to listen to, *B.* began to whistle a tune from *Thetis and Peleus*.

"Be quiet, cannot you?" *D.* said angrily.

"And *B.* took up his pen again, while the speaker shut his eyes in the resolute manner of a person who *will* not remain awake.

The slow ticking of the clock seemed to each one of them like the beating of a hammer on a bare nerve.

Yet, when at length it struck eleven, three out of the four started, for there is nothing so sudden as the arrival of a long-expected moment. In the interval between the first stroke and the eleventh, each man saw sharply defined before him a different picture—different and yet the same. Each man beheld two figures—one dead, one living. The dead man was the same in all the pictures; the living man, who stood over him, varied.

A. saw this picture on the open page of his book, *B.* on the blank sheet of letter-paper before him, *C.* in the glowing embers, *D.* on his own eyelids.

When the last vibration of the last stroke had died away, the silence settled down again more leadenly than before. Three out of the four men began to wonder where they would be this time to-morrow.

"It will not do," said *B.* abruptly. "He ought to keep time."

"He will keep time," said *A.*

"Hark!"

D. started up and curled his hand over his ear.

"What?"

"Hush! It's coming nearer."

"Thank Heaven!" cried *B.*

"You left the gate open?"

"Yes."

"And there are lights in the avenue?"

"Yes, yes."

"Unbar the door, somebody!"

D. ran to do so. The cold, keen, peaceful stillness of the air without refreshed him after the full, feverish atmosphere in which he had been breathing. But there was no sound.

He waited a second or two, and then, oddly frightened lest he should be the first to hear what they were all waiting for, he shut the door again and rejoined his comrades.

"A false alarm!" muttered *A.* "I thought so."

"I tell you I will bear this no longer," cried *B.*, after another interval of palpitating dumbness. "A man's nerves won't stand it. I am no coward, I hope, but I tell you fairly, *A.*, the thing is not possible. If he is to be shot, in Heaven's name challenge the poor young fellow, and do it decently! No adversary of yours has ever been known to escape. This is too much like murder for my taste."

"It is murder," said *A.* coolly. "There is always a certain element of chance in a duel. I have never fallen, but I might fall; and the fate of my companions demands that I should not fall—yet. Murder, if managed well, is certain. What right have you to object to murder? May I ask you to recollect your oath?"

"You forget that I am a gentleman," cried *B.* hotly.

"You yourself have no right to remember it. You have vowed to the gentlemen of your country not only

all you have, but all you are. It is of the utmost importance to those whom you represent, that the King should not receive the message, whatever it may be, which this young man carries. Messages to the King by his special messenger are never written; they are—I thought you knew this—transmitted by word of mouth. Therefore, as we cannot take the despatches from him, nothing but his treachery or his death can avail us; and he comes of too good a stock to turn traitor.”

“Why not imprison him?”

A. gave a short laugh.

“Where is the prison?” he said. “Find that, and we will make a prisoner of him by all means! This house is ours for to-night only. There is no other that we can claim within fifty miles. Where is the prison?”

B. dropped his head upon his hands and made no answer.

“Why not fire on him in the open?” suggested *D.* “It would be easier. He would have no more chance of escape, practically speaking, than here, between four walls, he being defenceless and we leagued together against him. Bah! you may say what you like, *A.*, but I am of *B.*’s opinion; it smacks too much of common murder. We shall never fire steadily.”

“It is not to be risked,” said *A.*

“Why?”

“Because I say so.”

D. was silent.

“’Tis an abominable business,” muttered *C.* “Of

all the accursed courtiers, why choose the only one that's worth his salt?"

A. turned on him fiercely.

"Because he is the only one likely to thwart our aim. The others are but a pack of cards; he has the mettle of a hero. Adonis has found it out too; he showers his favours upon him. He knows when a fish is worth catching."

"So do you, for the matter of that; only you bait your hook with fear, not with favour," said *C.* "There's an extraordinary fascination about fear. I fear nothing in this world that I am aware of, *A.*, except yourself; and I follow you because I am afraid of you and would rather be afraid of you than in love with another."

A. nodded his head.

"You do well," said he. "The fear of me will carry you farther than the love of anyone else. I am doomed. I go straight as a cannon-ball to the mark."

"Are you sure he will come to the house to-night?" asked *B.* "He might go on. He has but five miles farther to ride in order to reach the village, and he may think that he can do his errand here to-morrow, and still rejoin the King in time. In that case"—

"We shall hear him galloping past the gate; we shall mount and follow. Every objection has been foreseen and answered, as you are, by this time, aware; else I should not have allowed this conversation to proceed. The horses are standing ready, but I am much

mistaken, or they do not leave the stables to-night. There he is!"

The last words were spoken as quietly as all the rest.

The three accomplices sprang forward.

A. raised his hand deprecatingly.

"Be seated, gentlemen!" he said, in a tone which had the effect of physical force. "Let the groom open the door. Do you not see that, if one of us went out to meet him, he might hand in the letter without dismounting? It is our object to decoy him into this room. When he enters, bow to him, but take no further notice. The shutters are bolted. While I am speaking, C. will lock the door and secure the key. I shall try to get him into the garden. If it can be done there, so much the better. If not, the business must be finished here. Remember that no one sees whose shot it is which takes effect. Have you your weapons? Good! When you hear me say *The King*, fire!"

In a second the pistols had vanished from the table.

D. was asleep again upon the sofa.

B. was writing as if he were writing for a wager.

C. sat before the fire, the picture of indolent reverie.

The galloping hoofs came nearer, the sound grew louder and louder, and stopped short suddenly just outside.

There was a thundering knock on the door.

CHAPTER II.

IN WHICH THE HERO APPEARS.

"Is Colonel Engeström's cousin at home?" said a fresh young voice, broken and panting, for the rider was out of breath with the speed he had made.

"He is, sir."

"Ask him to speak to me at once. I am pressed for time."

"My master gave me the strictest injunctions that you should be shown into his private room, sir. I dare not disobey him. If you will step this way"—

"Be quick, then!" cried the voice, as, with a hurried oath, the rider dismounted. "My business is urgent; I cannot wait."

The servant ushered him in.

A., who had turned out the lamp just before, so that the faces of himself and his companions might not be recognised, rose courteously and bowed; the rest, excepting for the slight inclination which politeness required, kept their positions.

How is it that we can, nay, that we *must* see, whenever we do not wish to look? Is there some other sense than that of sight, by which, in moments of intense ex-

citement, the bodily image of a man is transferred to the brain?

They all beheld the person who had just entered the room. Not one of them but would have cried, had he been questioned at the moment, *I did not know he was like that*; and nothing could have shaken their nerve more. For he was handsome; there was nothing about him which could have led to any repulsion—rather a certain careless nobility of air and gesture, that did not solicit but commanded admiration. And above all he was young—they were all, except their leader, about the same age.

“To what circumstances do I owe the honour of this visit, so late at night?” said A.

The young man answered with frank impatience.

“To no desire of mine to make your acquaintance, sir,” he said. “I was entreated by Colonel Engeström to bring you this letter. You are his cousin, I presume?”

“The presumption is quite correct.”

“He begged me to deliver it into no hands but your own. Will you bear witness that I have performed my commission? I am in great haste, and shall be glad if you will not detain me any longer.” He tendered the letter that he held.

“A cold night!” said A., leaning his elbow on the mantelpiece and his head on his hand. “A very cold night! The stars are strangely brilliant. I do not remember that I ever saw so many in the group of the

Pleiades excepting once before." He spoke slowly and deliberately. Had the young man been quick of apprehension, he might have noticed that a figure which was more immediately in his shadow, as he stood there, stole to the door and back again.

"As a rule," continued *A.*, without pausing, "only a limited number are visible to the naked eye; but on that occasion, it was the anniversary of the birth of"—

"Pardon me!" interrupted the young man. "The history of the stars visible in the Pleiades on the occasion to which you allude would, no doubt, interest an astronomer. My present business is with earthly and not with heavenly bodies. And I am engaged in an affair of life and death."

Again he might have remarked a simultaneous movement of all the men in the room at the very moment when he began to speak; but it was over directly, and he was too much absorbed in his own sensations to take any heed.

"You are engaged in an affair of life and death?" said *A.* "Good! I am much obliged to you," and, with a murmured word of thanks, he took the letter.

The young man lifted his hat and went to the door.

The handle turned but it would not open.

He looked for the key; there was none.

Again he tried the handle.

"What does this mean, gentlemen?" said he.

"It means," said *A.*, looking up from his letter, "that you will not leave this room by the door."

The young man shrugged his shoulders.

"I am at a loss to comprehend you," he said. "Be so good as to explain."

"There are certain words which explain a good deal," said *A.*, "your own name, for instance. I have the honour to address Count Ribbing, have I not?"

"I have no need to be ashamed of my name, sir. It has been borne for over five hundred years in Sweden by men who have done nothing to disgrace it."

"Just so," said *A.* "It has been borne for over five hundred years in Sweden. High time it should die!"

Ribbing changed colour suddenly. He recollected that he was quite unarmed, that they were four to one, and the door was locked. He glanced up at the windows; they were shuttered and barred. There was no possible means of retreat. He thought of all this before it occurred to him to wonder why his life was threatened.

A., having paused an instant to let his words take effect, continued—

"We wish you to understand that we have no personal grudge against you—that we are, in fact, not persons at all, but representatives. The cause we represent demands your life—except on one condition."

"The condition?" said Ribbing, in a voice that was perfectly calm, but sounded to himself like someone else's.

"I ask your forgiveness for mentioning it beforehand. You comprehend that my doing so is the merest formality. It is a condition which no gentleman could accept, namely, that you reveal to us the message with which you are charged."

"I thought," said Ribbing, in the same voice, though he was angrily conscious that his heart was beating louder and faster than usual, "that I was among men of honour. It is my good fortune, apparently, to have fallen in with a band of assassins."

"Do not take the name of fortune in vain, sir," said A. "Destiny is but another title for God. See that your last words are not of such a light and frivolous character, that they move the celestial powers to darkness at the very moment when most you need their help. I have been young myself; in years, even now, I am not old. Although your eyes are steel and your voice unshaken and you play the man well enough for a boy, I know your heart is beating so that you are afraid we shall hear it; I know your breath comes unevenly, and I have marked your hand closing and unclosing twenty times in the last minute. It is useless to pretend before me. I know that you would, at the present moment, give anything except honour to be able to reveal what you will never reveal because honour forbids it. Further than this, I know that you would give anything—would you not?—for the mere chance of an impossible make-believe of resistance, so as to get your

blood up and die with a little more colour about it; but we are all armed men and you are utterly defenceless. If you will be guided by me, you will make no foolish and undignified struggle; you will give me your word not to attempt escape. In that case, I shall use no force. I shall not bind you hand and foot, as I shall be compelled to do if you show yourself obstinate. I shall only ask you to accompany us to the garden, and to place yourself with your back to the wall. These gentlemen are all good marksmen; we shall not hurt you."

"This condition at least I can accept," said Ribbing grandiloquently. It vexed him to feel that he was turning theatrical to avoid the semblance of cowardice; but to act well is difficult, when once the audience has reminded a man that it knows he is acting.

D., who was but a boy himself, experienced a sudden impulse of indignant, irrepressible pity.

"If the Count has any last wish that we could fulfil"—he whispered nervously to his chief.

"It is unlikely," said *A.* "The Count knows that our friends are not his. Still,"—he turned to his prisoner,—“if you have any wish of the kind, speak!”

"I have a wish of the kind, and it is very simple," said Ribbing. The timid murmur of sympathy had, in some strange manner, recalled him to himself; he no longer felt as if his intellect were paralysed. "This house stands on the highest hill in the neighbourhood, does it not?"

"I believe it does," said *D.*, surprised at the question.

"Will you allow me," said Ribbing, addressing himself to the leader, "to go to one of the rooms on the upper floor and to look out of the window?"

"No," returned *A.* drily.

"If I give you my word that I will not attempt to escape?"

"I will send one of these gentlemen, if he can pleasure you by going."

"That will do just as well," said Ribbing. "All that I wish to ascertain is, whether the light of a bonfire can be seen on the summit of a hill three miles due east from the spot on which we are standing."

"You can go, *D.* Be as quiet as you can! Lock the door after you. We will await your return here."

The leader seated himself and signed to Ribbing to occupy the place left vacant by the person he called *D.*

"It will take him five minutes at least to go up and five minutes to come down again," thought the young Count. "He has some heart in him."

The door was unlocked and locked again. The light, swift footsteps were heard ascending the staircase all too fast. Then they were lost above. When they were heard once more, all hope would be over. Ribbing knew well enough that there was no light in the direction which he had indicated; he had asked for the assurance simply because he could devise no other means of gaining time.

Time! Time! Time! It was more than half up by this, and still his mind was a blank. In desperation he opened his eyes—he had closed them that he might think more connectedly—and gazed around him.

The room was bare of furniture, with the exception of a few chairs, an old couch, a wooden table in the centre, and a forest of branching antlers, which covered the walls in every direction, interwreathing their fantastic, angular shadows in the firelight.

It seemed to him that he could do nothing for the tracery of the shadows of these deer's horns; from those of the great elk over the door to those of the gazelle over the chimneypiece he tried to disentangle each one separately and to get it clear, but it was no use. They were thickest over the clock. He could hear the loud ticks, but he could not see the face. He went on still at his work of disentangling, and this although he knew the minutes must be counted by seconds now. If he could only have seen the clock instead of hearing it—if he could only have known the limit of the time at his command, he could have thought. But the clock stood in a dark corner, and, so long as he did not know, he could not think. Time! Time! Time! "And there shall be no more time." The words possessed him.

"I wish I had never wished at all," he said to himself. "Why did I insist upon dying, when I was offered death without it? I must be as great a coward as that man thinks I am. Fie upon all such! I might as well be dead already and down among the shades, for all

the light there is, or the conversation either, in this grave of a room. What will it feel like, I wonder? *We will not hurt you.* As if he knew!"

"You are wondering what it will feel like," said A., lifting his eyes from the book that he was reading by the fire. "That plan of sending someone to the top of the house was only an expedient to gain time. You are not quite what I thought you."

A blush of hot shame and anger tinged Ribbing's pale cheek, but he contained himself and said nothing.

"You are wrong," went on A. "You do but lengthen your own suffering. D. was wrong too, although he meant well. B. and C. would have thought me cruel had I denied his request; but the real cruelty lay in granting it. I regret the last few moments more than you, who are not responsible, can possibly regret them. Reassure yourself, Count! A sudden pang, no worse than that which you experience when a tooth is drawn, and then a sudden sleep; death means no more than that. But if you think about it, it grows mysterious and dreadful. Try rather to distract the mind! I feel for you. I know you wish to preserve your dignity to the end. Do you take any interest in subjects of this kind?"

He handed Ribbing the book on which he had been engaged. The Count took it mechanically, and even at that pass, could not forbear a smile at the grotesqueness of the incident, when he read the title: *On the Proper Cultivation of the Coffee-Plant in the Island of*

Ceylon. He was about to give it back, when an idea occurred to him.

There flashed before his eyes the recollection of an old woman poring over the grounds in a coffee-cup, as she had been described to him a day or two since.

He almost laughed aloud.

On that old woman depended his one thin chance of life.

It was a desperate move indeed, yet he was quite resolved to play. He was not one of those who throw over the chessboard when once checkmate appears to be inevitable.

CHAPTER III.

IN WHICH THE HERO RIDES AWAY.

EVERY energy of Ribbing's mind was bent to the move. Holding the open volume like a shield between himself and his enemy—for he had an instinctive fear that the latter would read his thoughts, even by that dim light, as easily as a printed page, if he did not interpose a solid, substantial non-conductor—he wondered whether this man were superstitious or not. It seemed hard to be within whispering distance of him, and not even to know what his features were like, so as to have some clue; but Adolf dared not risk so much as a glance. He was a revolutionist of the type then called *Illuminé*—so much was clear—and he took an interest in coffee-planting and agriculture. Beyond that the Count knew nothing; but he determined to play as boldly as if he did. It was some comfort to him to reflect that he could not make his case more desperate than it was already.

One slight circumstance fanned the spark of hope that a chance word had kindled, and one alone. Dangling upon the chief's watch-chain, as he hung thoughtfully over the fire, Ribbing saw a little fork-shaped piece of

coral, such as is worn by peasants in Italy, to avert the Evil Eye from their persons. He knew what it meant, for his mother possessed an amulet of the same kind; but he could not allow himself to build much upon so trivial an indication.

A moment more, and the messenger was heard descending the staircase with heavy and slow steps. The key groaned in the lock, and the door creaked as it turned on its hinges, thrust open by an unwilling hand. The critical moment was come, and Ribbing braced himself to meet it, and thought resolutely of nothing.

"Well?" inquired *A*. "Was there a bonfire burning on the summit of a hill, three miles due east from the spot on which you are standing?"

D. shook his head.

"Have you any more last wishes?" went on *A*. scornfully. "Would you like to know whether there is a bonfire on a hill three miles due west?"

"No."

"Once more, then, and for the last time, will you betray the King, or will you follow me?"

"I will do neither," said Ribbing, with a sudden audacity. "I will not betray the King, but you—if you are a wise man—will do me no harm."

"Why?"

"Because," said the Count, mimicking as well as he could his enemy's *sang-froid*, though he felt conscious

that the imitation was but a clumsy one, "it is by my hand that the King will fall."

"Are you mad?" said A., with some contempt. "Do you yourself believe what you are saying?"

"No," said Ribbing; and this time his voice had the ring of conviction. "If I did, I should entreat you to fulfil the sentence which you have just pronounced immediately. But you will believe it. It was spoken by Noorna Arfridson."

The person whom he addressed gave a slight start. Was the move indeed a successful one? Whether it were or no, to have shaken the equanimity of that man of ice, even for one instant, was nothing less than a triumph; and death would come easier.

"What proof have you to give of this?" said the leader abruptly. "We have only your word for it."

"I should never have dreamed of asking the present company to rely on the word of a man of honour," said the young Count, shrugging his shoulders. "But it so happens that I have in my pocket a letter addressed to my mother, which contains a detailed account of the whole transaction. It is perhaps just possible that you will credit me, when I tell you that it has not been forged during the last ten minutes. As the first part of it refers to family affairs, I shall be obliged if you will consider it in the light of a private communication, only reading aloud that part of it which concerns the visit of His Majesty to the Sibyl."

A. took the letter, glanced rapidly over the first

page, and began to read at the second, bending still lower over the embers to enable himself to decipher it.

“His Majesty is in excellent health. Were it not for the modesty which I inherit from you, my dearest mother, along with my brown eyes and my little straight nose, I should be tempted to sinful pride. His kindness knows no bounds.

“Yesterday, as I was crossing the North Bridge, I was surprised to meet him on foot and unattended, except by the Grand Chamberlain. I had often heard that he traversed Stockholm thus *incognito*, in order to find out as a man what is hidden from him as a king; but at Court we say more than our prayers occasionally, and you cannot accept everything, so I confess that I felt surprised. He made a sign to me not to take any notice of him, nodded to the Grand Chamberlain, who went on his way immediately, drew my arm within his own, and walked along by my side for a minute or two without speaking. Then he gave a low laugh, and said, with the arch, half-mischievous expression that is so charming when he condescends to be familiar, “If I did not know what an excellent heart you have, my dear Count,—if I did not know that you are a man of high principle,—I should do well to be very much afraid of you.”

“In vain I begged him to explain his meaning. He only laughed.

“At last I became seriously uneasy, for I thought that some chance word or action of mine must have

been misrepresented. You know what an atmosphere of scandal and backbiting it is; one is never safe for an instant.

“When he saw that he had alarmed me, he changed his tone at once. Much as I have always loved him—indeed, after yourself and one other, there is none for whom I entertain so deep an affection—I think I never loved him so much as at that moment. It was as though he were my elder brother, and could not, even in jest, cause me a moment of real pain.

“‘Come, come!’ he said, ‘I was only in fun. Tell me, Count, do you believe in soothsaying?’

“‘No, sire,’ I answered, more readily than my dearest mother would perhaps have thought right.

“‘There is something in it, notwithstanding,’ said he. ‘But, in the present instance, I think the witch reckoned without her host. Did you know that Fröken Arfridson was a witch, Ribbing?’

“‘All fair ladies are witches, sire,’ I replied. ‘I must admit that I have never heard of this one.’

“‘Fröken Arfridson is neither fair nor a lady,’ laughed His Majesty. ‘Pah, the horrid old hag! Yet, when I entered her dirty room, disguised as you see me, she got up instantly, made me three curtseys down to the ground, and said, “Be seated, sire!” at once. How did she know?’

“‘There are portraits of your Majesty in every other shop window in Stockholm,’ I observed, ‘and the portraits are very like your Majesty.’

“‘Sceptic!’ pursued the King. ‘She told my fortune in the grounds of a coffee-cup. That our fate is written in the stars, I can easily believe—that were a royal thought—but the bottom of a coffee-cup, my dear fellow! Even prophecy is become democratic. What dreadful days we live in! When she had done, she sat for a long time, with her eyes shut; then she screamed; then she said in a whisper, so low that I could scarcely hear her, “Sire, ’tis a cruel end!”

“““What end?” I asked her.

“““I dare not, sire!”

“““I insist. Speak!” I said, adopting the air with which I say to the Diet, “Be dumb!”

““She hesitated, or pretended to hesitate.

““At length she said, trembling, “Sire, you will one day be assassinated by the first person whom you meet on the North Bridge, after you leave this house.”

““I need not tell you, my dear Count, who was the first person I met.””

Directly the reading stopped, there was a dead silence.

Ribbing watched intently, though without the intolerable sensation of suspense which had before oppressed him. He had done something. The weight of utter helplessness was gone. Be the result what it might, he felt happier. Some kind of change had come over the face of the leader, but whether the change betokened anger or relief, he could not feel certain. The rest were holding their breath. All about the room the shadows seemed to grow thicker.

At last a voice spoke out of the darkness: "I war with kings, not with the King of kings. Young man, go free!"

Count Ribbing's impulse was to rush towards the door, but he forced it back and merely rose from his chair, overmastered by the fear of showing that he had been afraid. He thought of nothing else at that moment.

The leader took the key from his lieutenant, and ushered him, with grave courtesy, into the hall. They might have been parting after a formal visit.

"Can I assist you to mount?" he inquired.

"No, I am much obliged to you," said the Count, returning the other's dignified bend of the head.

But he had hardly sprung into the saddle before he was a boy again. Rising in his stirrups, turning half round in the direction of the house, and making a hollow of both his hands so that the sound should carry, he shouted with all his might in the courtly language that was, as he knew, best calculated to rouse the indignation of those within—

"Vive le Roi!"

CHAPTER IV.

IN WHICH THE HERO REFLECTS.

THE night was cold, the day was not yet born, but the sun at noon, in midsummer had never shone upon Count Ribbing with such celestial radiance as did these fading stars.

Life danced in his veins and flushed his cheeks. Laughing aloud, singing and shouting, mad with the reckless joy of a caged animal set free, he raced along the highroad, marking his fiery course by the sparks that flashed from the hoof of his excited steed.

"I am alive!" he cried; it was the first time he had ever felt surprised at that simple fact. The boughs of the sycamore trees, planted in long, straight rows on either side, in imitation of the poplar avenues of France, quivered as he went under, the rocks resounded, and the hills echoed his voice.

"I am alive!" he sang; then, with a sudden change of tone —

"We were young, we were merry, we were very, very wise,
And the door stood open at our feast;
When there passed us a woman with the West in her eyes,
And a man with his back to the East.'"

He had heard a beggar chant this once, when he came upon the man unexpectedly, in one of the lowest streets in Stockholm, returning from his day's work. The image of the jolly old fellow, caught at such an unprofessional exercise, just crossed his brain like some faint, thin impression saved from the forgotten experiences of a former life; but the words rose to his lips of their own accord, as doggerel will after a solemn crisis.

"Who sings my song?" exclaimed a thick, harsh voice. A ragged figure rushed instantly across the road at great risk to itself, and seized the horse's bridle, forcing it back with such haste that the startled beast reared on its haunches, and Ribbing had much ado to keep his seat. "Who sings my song?"

"One of the King's servants," said Ribbing.

"You lie," returned the voice. "A beggar sings it—a beggar at the Sign of the Black House, a beggar at the Sign of the Three Water-Lilies, a beggar at the Sign of the Knight of the North. An alms of life from the Black House, an alms of love from the Three Water-Lilies; but when the Knight of the North refuses both, sing that song where you will within a mile of St. Brita's Cross, and the Beggars will come to your aid!"

"Let me go!" said Ribbing, who scarcely noted this oracular speech. He thought the man was mad, and flung a piece of money upon the road to loosen the claw-like grip of his fingers from the rein.

"No," said the man. "You should not have sung

my song. I take no money from those of my own trade. Good-night, beggar!"

The voice grew lower instead of louder as he let go, and Ribbing, who had raised his whip angrily, hesitated for full a minute; then he set spurs to his horse and galloped on and on, until the strange figure of his would-be associate mingled with the darkness behind him. "Good-night, beggar!" The expression, coming from the quarter whence it came, was so absurd that he burst out laughing. He thought of the black, bony figure, the black, long nails, and laughed the more; but his laughter broke short off in the middle.

On a sudden, the terror which he had doggedly resisted for the last dreadful half-hour within doors, not daring to look it in the face, raised up its face and looked at him.

There was nothing—no reason—only a scare and panic; the overbalancing of courage, which had hung suspended, on the wrong side. For the first time in his life, he felt that he was a craven; that nothing on which he had been accustomed to lean for support was of any avail. All things, material and spiritual, seemed to have melted into one hungry, brooding enmity. There was no escape; his young untested strength was altogether cowed.

Rather the shadowy chamber; rather the dark, unmanlike men; rather the sense of imminent doom and that tight bracing of the nerves to meet and to endure to the utmost; rather anything than this empty, insigni-

ficant horror of a mere void—and no one by, not even his worst foe, to shame him into the semblance of self-respect.

Such a dizzy faintness overcame the lad, that he was fain to dismount because his head was swimming and his flaccid hand could no longer hold the reins.

The horse, after its wild career, was glad to stand still, panting, by his side, where he lay in the frosty grass, unable to breathe except in long-drawn sobs of stifled vitality, sick with a sickness of heart which only the fear of death causes, and that not more than once or twice in the lifetime it would otherwise shorten.

He had the sense to soak his handkerchief in the rime—for the feeling was, after all, more than half physical—and to bind it loosely round his forehead. After a few moments of perfect stillness, of clinging with all the energy he possessed to that one delicious sensation of cold, the weight rolled off him, and he remained, how long he knew not, in a blissful trance of comfort, the world his friend, certain that never again in life should he fear anything, unless it were to break the spell of this perfect peace by any movement.

The sensation, however, drifted off painlessly, and he became his normal self and sat up, dazed, as though he had but just returned from a journey into the ultimate seat of consciousness of some unknown nature and scarcely recognised his own.

What was he to do? Go on—that was obvious; and, climbing wearily into the saddle, he urged Sleipner

forward along the hard, unending road. Out of the dim haze of his perceptions, certain definite images floated up to the surface and grew distinct. He shivered yet, although the sickness was past, when he remembered those twisted antlers round the wall. He saw the fire-light gleam upon the little fork of coral.

It was at once the most real and the most dream-like experience through which he had ever passed—the most real in after imagination, the most dream-like in its actual happening. It was so distinct that the process by which he recalled it appeared to be far more vivid than memory, yet so unusual, that he could hardly persuade himself he was awake. He repeated out loud the message to the King with which he had been charged, to make sure that he was still master of a formula which could give him the clue to his own identity. Until he got through this ordeal, it seemed to him that he recollected it only as people recollect a poem without the words or a tune without sounds. The young man who rode away from that door was a different young man from the one who had ridden up to it; so different indeed, that he fell to considering next how things would have stood had he accomplished the greatest change of all—and died.

Never having seen a dead man, he had recourse to fancy, and quickly he beheld himself divided, his body stretched stiff and straight under the wall in the garden, while something that could not be seen, something that

had no eyes, something more impalpable than a breath, more intangible than an essence, escaped.

He pursued his body. He saw it lowered into the grave; he went down with it, and, shuddering disgustedly, he saw what would happen there.

"But only for a time," he said. "After that, flowers."

He pursued his soul.

But that is a pursuit which none but the very young undertake, and this same night had made him too old.

"Nineteen!" he thought. "And Tala!"—

He rested on the word. "If I were dead now, she would be living here without me."

"Tala!"

Some names are a perpetual prayer; this, whenever he thought of it gravely, was thanksgiving. That night it seemed to be the only thing which had suffered no change at all.

Tears started to his eyes for the first time, as he bethought him of the tears that he had never seen in hers. Had the danger been but a little farther off in space and time, he was capable of having wished himself dead to deserve them, for sentiment had more than its due share in his composition; but for the moment, fact held him fast in her grim claws, and he knew, as he did not always know either before or afterwards, the full value of mortal existence."

He recollected his mother too; but it was not the same egotistic luxury to ponder on her grief, for she had wept too much before, and was too well accustomed to sorrow ever to mourn as a girl mourns, when it is new. The breaking of broken hearts is a poor achievement. It might be worth while to leave the world to make Tala cry; the reflection that that pistol-shot would probably have killed her to whom he owed his being gave him but little pleasure.

Lastly he thought of the King. Would the King have cared? The answer was not long in coming.

"No."

And he worshipped more devoutly than before.

CHAPTER V.

THE CASTLE OF CARL DE GEER.

AT this point in his meditations, an indescribable sound, so faint that at first it was possible for him to think he had imagined it, struck on his ear.

He rode a few steps farther and heard it again—more distinctly this time.

A few steps farther yet, and it turned into music. Then, before he could make out what manner of music this might be, it was lost.

He had come out of a world of dreams into a world where things were beginning—in a lame, tentative way—to be real again. Now he passed a cottage, and another cottage. No queer faces grinned out of the window; no strange, dark figure stood at the door. He looked hard to assure himself of this, for he felt an odd conviction that, if he had not looked hard and close, he should have seen them.

Each cottage that he passed, however, seemed less fantastic than the one before. When he came to two or three, huddled together at the entrance of an untidy village, he almost thought that human beings might inhabit here.

A voice confirmed the impression.

"Half after twelve at night, and a fine evening!"

It was the old watchman, going his rounds with a lantern; for the oil lamp, swung on a creaking chain across the little street, existed but to make darkness visible. The rough, homely voice was pleasant; there was nothing unnatural about it; and Ribbing stopped an instant to ask the shortest way to the Castle of Carl de Geer—although he knew this well enough—simply for the pleasure of hearing it again.

"You are a late guest," said the old man, raising his lantern, "but Carl de Geer never turned man or beast from his door. Keep along by the lake side, and a few minutes will bring you to it. Good-night, young master!"

"A more fitting salutation than that of my friend on the highway!" laughed the Count.

He had left the village some way in the rear, when he stopped to reconnoitre; it seemed to him that the air was a thought less keen.

"I have ridden near upon three miles by now," he said. "This must be the lake."

The wan glimmer of something that was not land soon assured him that he was right. In spite of the violent impatience that sprang up in him at the sight, kindling the lifeless obstinacy, like that of a person dreaming, with which he had hitherto pursued his way, he compelled himself to ride with care, for it was long since the path had been mended, and the horse was

but too likely to stumble upon the rough, uneven ground. Young as he was, he had learnt caution; haste made him slow.

Yet it was all he could do to restrain a wild, ringing cheer, when, rounding a corner suddenly, he saw, straight in front of him, the Castle of Carl de Geer.

It stood on a small promontory, overlooking the lake. He had expected to find it black and desolate, the inhabitants all wrapped in slumber; he beheld it gleaming with light from every window. The music was now clearly audible.

"Violins!" said he to himself. "It is the *Menuet de la Cour* they are playing. I thought it had been a merry tune. Out here it sounds like a dirge."

But sound has its perspective as well as light, and that which distance makes pathetic, becomes, as we approach it, familiar and practical. The wonderful strain changed when he found the gate open, and, hungry and weary as he was, the Count inspired himself afresh with the recollection that he was the bearer of great tidings. It was to a tune of triumph that he rode gaily up the steep ascent and under the heavy archway.

The archway also was lighted up; he could distinguish the well-known sign of the Three Water-Lilies, embroidered on the faded banner waving over his head.

The door stood open; no need to knock.

Within, the hall was filled with young men and maidens, all in gala attire, the stiff brocade and the powdered head-dresses of the girls showing in high re-

lief against a background of darkest oak, blazoned with the shields of many different generations, amongst which the Three Water-Lilies held the most prominent place. At the upper end stood she whom his eyes sought, his cousin, Tala, in the act of stepping forward to meet her partner, her hand held high in his. She was one alone among her snowy-haired companions, for the thick auburn tresses, which distinguished her, were raised in shining masses from her white brow and drawn up from her little neck, curling and coiling with devious grace, in all their bright perfection of colour. Happening to turn her head at that moment, she saw the dark form upright in the doorway, the pale face framed in the blackness of night, and, dropping her fan in her hurry, rushed forward, with arms held out, to meet him.

"Dolf! Dolf!" she cried. "His spirit! I knew that he would come."

The groups of dancers divided, in consternation, to let her through; but when she had reached the middle of the hall her courage failed, and she stopped short—self-conscious—frightened by their wondering eyes.

For a single instant Ribbing had hesitated. What did she mean? Was he on this side death? Smiling at himself for his bewilderment, restraining as best he might his longing to take her in his arms and still the outburst of nervous laughter to which she had given way, he walked quietly up the hall and dropped on one knee before her.

"Very well done, upon my word!" sneered Tala's

former partner, Baron Essen, to the lady beside him. "The fellow might get an engagement at the Theatre Royal, might he not? His Majesty likes that kind of thing."

"How now, you Wild Huntsman?" cried Ribbing's uncle, Carl de Geer, advancing to greet him. "The little one is weeping, I declare. What need to frighten us all by arriving in this costume? And at such an hour too!"

"What need indeed?" said Adolf, rising to his full height with the calm assurance of one who knows that the tidings of which he is the bearer are strange enough to make amends for whatever may have seemed odd in his behaviour. "What need indeed, when the Danes are besieging Gothenburg and threatening Stockholm—when the King himself is gone to rouse the peasants of Dalecarlia—when, unless we burn the fiery beacon on every hilltop, our homes and hearths will be the blazing torches, to light us on our way to exile? Come, fiddlers, strike up 'The Song of the Sword'! Give me your hand, sweet cousin. I myself, and all these gentlemen present, may have danced the Dance of Death before we meet again."

He had been carried beyond himself, and spoken as a young man never means to speak but sometimes does.

There was a momentary pause.

Then the violins struck up "The Song of the

Sword," as though the King himself had commanded it; the gallants raised their weapons, inclining them until the glittering points touched in an arch of glory, and underneath he passed with Tala as lightly as though he had been the ghost that she thought him.

CHAPTER VI.

A HOUSE DIVIDED.

"AND now," said a dry voice, immediately on the conclusion of the dance, while the fiddles were still vibrating, "may we be privileged to inquire into the real sense of the masquerade? I, for my part, have no great taste for private theatricals, when public interests are at stake. Before I follow this infant Cupid to Gothenburg, whither he apparently proposes to lead myself and every other gentleman in the room, I should wish to inspect his credentials. Who knows whether he has been duly authorised by the Diet, or whether this is only another of the King's benevolent schemes for ridding Sweden of the flower of her nobility? Hästesko may be in prison, but we have not forgotten him."

There was a murmur of assent. Colonel Hästesko had refused to lead the troops in the war with Russia, but the nobles considered that the King had not been justified in undertaking it, and his arrest rankled freshly in the memory of many of those who were present.

Adolf stepped forward with blazing eyes.

"Gentlemen," he said, "you hear the accusation.

It is to you that I make my defence. My orders are not signed by the Diet—there was no time to confer. It is but a day since the news was brought to His Majesty at the château de Haga, where I had the honour to be in attendance. In an hour's time he had despatched all the available troops to Gothenburg, had formed the citizens of Stockholm into a garrison, entrusting to their guardianship the Queen and her children, had started—accompanied only by two of his most intimate friends among the officers—for Mora, where he appointed me to meet him. You have heard all that there is to hear. The beacons must be lit upon every hilltop; the rendezvous is at Mora. Those of you who decline to obey the summons"—he turned slightly in the direction of Baron Essen—"will do well indeed to remember the fate of Hästesko."

"More heroics!" said the Baron, shrugging his shoulders. "It is as I thought. He has no authority from the Diet."

"He has no authority from the Diet!" echoed about the room.

"Traitor!" cried Adolf, and stamped his foot upon the floor. Several of those who were standing near him crossed over to Baron Essen.

"Nephew," said Carl de Geer, bending his brows, "the Baron is my guest—in consequence, he is yours also. Your youth alone, and your infatuation, can excuse an insult offered to one who is under the shelter of your own roof-tree. I demand that you instantly

retract the offensive expression, which you made use of in the heat of the moment."

"I will not retract it," said Adolf indignantly. "I will repeat it, if you like, and with interest. Baron Essen is a traitor to his King and to his country; furthermore, he is a coward. He knows that he is free to insult a man who is bound on the King's service, and cannot stay to demand satisfaction. I call no roof-tree mine that harbours such people. Farewell, sir! I am your debtor for one night's loan of a horse. Saddle me the fastest in the stables, Bru, and be quick! My man will be here with the dawn; he will bring Sleipner to me to Mora and restore you your own. Adieu, Tala!"

Here it occurred to Adolf that the most provoking thing he could do before Baron Essen would be to embrace Tala, and he did it accordingly, with no emotion whatever except a calm desire to infuriate that person. As his cold lips touched her forehead, she whispered—

"The summer-house on the Reindeer's Crag!"

He touched her hand in token that he understood, strode out of the hall, followed by many threatening glances as he went, waited sullenly until the horse was brought round, flung himself on to its back, and rode off at a gallop.

He was very angry—so angry that he was not in a passion. When indignation hoists her white flag, not her red one; when she turns to ice instead of to fire,

she is dangerous. Baron Essen had good cause to remember "The Song of the Sword." Adolf himself rode for awhile like a man who has taken food and a draught of strong wine and is much refreshed, but the sensation, new and absorbing though it was, wore off after a little, and he began to feel light-headed, as if thinking were unaccountably easy and movement impossible. It was ten hours, at least, since he had tasted anything, and for the greater part of that time he had been on horseback. Eager as he was, he felt that he could not go farther. He had been delicately reared, and this was his first experience of privation. It was well for him that Tala thought of the hut on the Reindeer's Crag. The ascent was not hard, comparatively speaking, and at the top he knew there was a little deserted shelter, in which they had often played at keeping house together when they were children. There, at anyrate, he could sleep until daybreak, without the risk of being frozen on the bare ground.

Fastening his horse to the tall flagstaff outside, from which the Three Water-Lilies were still floating, as he remembered them of old, he lifted the latch and went in.

The hut contained nothing but a few rough logs, standing on end, by way of chairs, and one larger than the rest, which did duty for a table in the centre. It was, of course, quite dark, but so much he distinguished by means of the bruises which he inflicted on himself as he stumbled about amongst them.

The first that came to hand was rolled over on the ground to make a pillow, and he wrapped himself up in his cloak and lay down.

Altogether overcome by fatigue, he was on the point of falling into a sound sleep, when a light tap at the door forced him back into consciousness. He closed his eyes obstinately, resolute that, come what might, he would not be defrauded of his hard-earned repose.

But the tap was repeated.

Now a person who is bent on slumber may, if he will, ignore a thunderstorm or an earthquake, but a little persistent noise, occurring at uncertain intervals, is enough to wake the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus; and Adolf sprang to his feet, with a muttered cry of "Go to the crows of Odin, whoever you are!"

The ungracious exclamation failed of its due effect, for the door was timidly pushed open, and an apparition, so like his dreams that it was better than the best of them, revealed itself on the instant.

There stood Tala, clothed from head to foot in snow-white fur, one or two locks of auburn hair straying from under the soft edges of her hood—the light of the torch she carried gleaming upon her flushed cheeks and in her radiant, red-brown eyes.

"Dolf! Dolf!" she said, half laughing, to conceal the pretty shyness, dearer to him now than all the dear familiarity which had existed between them almost ever since he could remember, "did you not hear me? Why did you not say 'Come in'?"

CHAPTER VII.

A HOUSE AT UNITY.

IF Adolf had been remiss about saying "Come in!" before, he certainly could not be accused of any desire to keep the hut to himself a moment longer.

"How cold it is!" said Tala, shivering, for all her furs, as she put down the basket she carried. "My poor, poor Dolf!"

"Do not call me '*Poor* Dolf!'" he said, with a joyous laugh, taking the torch from her and thrusting it sideways into a chink in the wall. "There's another word that is better."

"What do you mean, dear Adolf?"

"As if you did not know! Tala, I thought you were honest. Say it again, as if you did."

"I shall do no such thing. Give me your hand!" She stooped till her cheek touched it, as if by accident. "You are as cold as ice. Put on these gloves directly."

She pulled off the loose gloves, lined and trimmed with fur, which were worn by the ladies of the North in those as in these days, and tried to thrust Adolf's fingers into them, laughing as she did so at his awkwardness. "There! That is beautiful! But you ought

to be ashamed to find that they fit you, all the same, a grown-up man like you! Never mind! I like small hands. Baron Essen's are big. Oh, if we could only make a fire! Why, why did I not bring the tinder-box? How could I forget it?"

"I have got a flint and some tinder in my pocket, but what's the use of that? There is no wood."

"You great gigantic stupid!" said Tala. "Don't you remember that the wood is always stacked here? Have you quite forgotten our wedding when you were ten and I was nine, and how we roasted potatoes to celebrate it? You faithless husband! Why, this is worse than my forgetting the tinder. There it is in the corner, faggots and boughs and all! It has got its dry leaves still; it will make a fine blaze. Not all at once like that—break it up, silly fellow! Now then, where is your tinder-box? Why, there was the torch all the time; we never thought of it! If we had something light to put at the top— Oh yes, I know!"

She pulled a book out of her pocket.

"What is that?" cried Adolf, trying to seize it; but the fur gloves made his hands feel like paws, and she held it behind her when he attacked in front, and over her head when he went round to the rear.

"Be quiet, Dolf! I brought it for you to read, because I thought you would be dull up here by yourself; but it's a stupid book—nothing but Voltaire's poems—and you had much better be dull than cold. Besides, Baron Essen gave it me."

"Allow me to help you tear it up!" said Ribbing; but Tala had made short work of it already, and the fire was beginning to crackle, and the smoke to curl up through a hole in the roof.

Then she turned to the basket.

"There's half a turkey, Adolf," she said apologetically. "I was very sorry I could not find a whole one, but the greedy people had eaten them all up."

"Ravenous though I am, dearest," said Adolf, "I think that I shall have enough with half. How your little arms must have ached! It weighs a ton at least."

"He *was* heavy," said Tala, with self-satisfaction. "It's Gobbo, the turkey-cock; he used to fly at you last winter. You recollect him, do you not? And there are some oatcakes and a jug of mead. Oh, I am so glad you have got a knife! I did not remember to bring one. Is it a very long time since you had anything to eat, Adolf?"

"It is a long time," said Adolf, pausing, with a slight sense of shame, in the midst of his tremendous assault upon Gobbo, but falling to again instantly.

Tala seated herself on the log he had taken for a pillow, beside the fire. It did not give much warmth yet, but it gleamed brightly on her bright hair, and the flames leapt up as if her hands had a magnetic power of drawing them.

"You looked as if you were half starved," she said compassionately.

"Oh, a man soon gets used to that sort of thing!"

said Adolf, with affected carelessness, charmed to have made an impression. "Are you quite convinced that I am not a ghost now?" he added, laughing.

She nodded, with some significance.

"But why did you think I was?" he continued, more gravely.

"Oh, I don't know!" said Tala, her shyness returning. She hesitated. "I—I had been thinking a great deal about you, Dolf."

"So had I been thinking a great deal about you, Tala, but I never thought you were a ghost."

"I do not know why it was," she said, her eyes filling with tears. "I could not bear it, if you were to die."

"But did you think I was in any danger to-night?"

"Oh no, of course not! How should I? I thought you were with the King at Stockholm."

He felt a sudden chill. To speak the truth, that wild cry of hers had delighted him; now the illusion was dispelled.

"I am very sorry I was so foolish," Tala said meekly. Adolf sighed.

"Are you angry with me?"

"No. But how dreadful it is to think that you or I might be very ill—dying—and the other not know."

"I should know," said Tala softly; "I should know. I dream so often."

"But you do not believe in dreams?"

"No, because you told me not to; but they come all the same."

"I do not wish you to believe in childish superstitions of that kind," said Adolf pompously. "I am a follower of the light of pure reason."

Tala was silent.

"Did you ever hear of Noorna Arfridson?" he asked.

"Yes."

"She told the King that I should kill him."

Tala shrank back in horror.

"Do you not believe that I should kill myself first?" said Adolf, with an imperious gesture.

"I do, I do," said Tala, flashing her great eyes full upon him, as if to let him read in them the perfect confidence she could not trust herself to utter. "*You* kill the King! Why, you would die for him!"

Somehow or other, her words recalled the twisted shadows of the antlers on the wall, the firelight playing on the fork of coral. If it were all to happen over again—?

"Yes," he said, with grave deliberation, answering his own thought rather than her speech. "Yes, I would die for him."

It was not spoken as Tala had expected.

"What do you mean?" she said quickly.

"All that I say."

"There is a change in you, Adolf. You are older."

He smiled.

"You speak as people speak when they are old, when they do everything by weight and measure."

"Is not that wise?"

"It may be wise," said Tala. "I will not love you, if you do it. I loved you first because you were foolish."

"Indeed? That is a compliment, madame!"

"Baron Essen is wise; he would never risk his life for anything in the world except to save it. It was he who made them all wise to-night, so that they would not listen. I hated him."

"It is not for me to say you were foolish, then."

"I had another reason. He looks behind my eyes as you do. If only he and I had not been dancing when you came in! He looked into my eyes; he saw what no one else but you has seen. He had no right to see it. It was taking away what is yours. And in a moment I knew it, and I hated him. I hated him so much that I forgot you, Adolf."

"Poor mean beast!" said Adolf, with contemptuous pity. "I do not hate him."

"You will some day."

He had never heard her speak so low except once; and that was when she answered his first passionate avowal.

"Do you think anyone ever fell in love with anyone before—I mean like this, Adolf?"

"Yes," said Adolf promptly, "everyone."

"You must be wrong," she said, between jest and earnest. "If it had been the same with everyone, why should I mind his seeing? Oh no, we found it out, you and I!"

"Your father and mother and mine found it out first."

"But, Adolf,"—the note of suffering made her silvery voice ring sharp,—“my father is wise too.”

"Will he be angry with you for to-night?" said Adolf, with some anxiety.

"I hope so."

He gazed at her in blank surprise.

"I never deceived him before. I do not like deceiving. I wish women could fight. These men could go to-night to help the King and they will not. Cowards! cravens that they are! But it was all Baron Essen. If he had not been there, they would have gone. He is a coward, Adolf—a coward, I tell you!"

"If he be, I am sorry for him," said Adolf slowly. He could not have spoken thus the day before.

"And I am sorry for him," said Tala, "sorry as the Scotch General was for the coward in his army. I cannot pronounce his name. Knut Hamilton told me about it, the other day; he served in the Scotch war more than forty years back. The coward was the son of an old friend of his; the first time he ran away under fire, the General sent for him, told him that he had no business to be a soldier, and urged him to go away and

be a merchant, a shopkeeper—what do I know?—some stupid, peaceful thing. The young man fell at his feet and wept, and prayed for one last chance. At length the General yielded. But when the swords clashed once more, and the balls whistled, and the shot fell, the coward was a coward again. He had turned his horse to fly, when the General came up with him. ‘Your father’s son is too good a man for the Provost Marshal,’ said he, and he raised his pistol and fired, and the man fell dead to the ground. That is what should be done to all cowards.”

“After all, they have wives and children,” said Adolf, enjoying the sensation that he could afford to be magnanimous, as he took another long pull at the jug.

“Wives and children!” cried Tala scornfully. “What sort of wives can they be? No, no! They call it *wives and children*, but it is fear. Why are people afraid, Adolf? When you are far away, I often come up here by myself, and think and think how it would be to die. That is because I want you so. If I were dying, I should think of you. If what you say is true, and everybody has one to love, how can they feel afraid?”

“Shall I tell you a secret?” said Adolf, looking curiously at her. “When you are dying, you think of only one thing—how not to die. I know. I thought I was dying myself once—not lately,”—he saw the alarm in her eyes,—“a long time ago.”

“You never told me. How was it?”

“It is not worth talking about. Do not look terri-

fied; I am sorry I spoke of it. I thought you were afraid of nothing. Take care! What are you about? Your dress will catch fire."

She had sprung up from her seat, but stood gazing as if spellbound, until he dragged her away. The fire had caught the thin boards behind, whilst they were talking. A moment more, and the hut would be in a blaze; it was beginning to fill with smoke already.

"The first fire that we lit together will burn our first house down," she said. "This is the beacon that you wished to light upon the hilltop, Adolf."

"One toast before we go," he cried, lifting the jug to her lips.

"To the health of the King!" she said, just touching the edge.

"To the health of the King!" he shouted, draining it to the last drop, before he flung it over his shoulder.

They hurried out together, Adolf grasping the torch, which he had plucked from between the boards.

It was not a second too soon. The little summer-house was dry, and burned quickly. All at once the roof fell in with a crash, and the great tongues of flame shot up to heaven.

"Glorious! glorious!" he cried, brandishing the torch over his head in his excitement, and shouting until the mountains rang again. "Everywhere they will see it. They cannot fail. The country will be up in arms tomorrow. Glorious! glorious!"

He got no answer. The fire in Tala's eyes went out; tears overbrimmed them.

"We lived together there," she said. "Shall we ever live together again?"

He turned and looked. She stood there, cold and white, in the fierce red gleam of the flames. She took the torch and silently reversed it. That was his last vision of her. In the moment that came after she was too close for any vision.

Nor did he see a dark figure creep from behind the flagstaff and follow her, as she went down the hill.

CHAPTER VIII.

IN THE GREAT WOODS.

THE rest of Adolf's journey was accomplished without misadventure. When he looked back on it in after-days, it shone out from his life, before and after, with a peculiar radiance. For the full delight of being young is not experienced till youth has received its first shock, and the full glory of independent action intoxicates for the first time then, when defeat, at the very outset, has been turned into victory.

It was autumn in the great woods. Everywhere their green was lightening into gold, deepening to crimson; but man in his own springtime knows no change of the seasons, and if Adolf marked it at all, as he rode singing through them, it was only to rise in his stirrups to strike the highest bough that he could reach with his whip and make the leaves float down in golden showers around him, while he essayed to catch one here and there, in memory of an old game that he and Tala had played as children, when every leaf thus intercepted in its passage to the dark earth was called a "happy day." And many a "happy day" he caught, and the vision was not brighter than the present reality.

For he was not received in other houses as Carl de Geer had received him. It was the great nobles who hated the King of Sweden. The tenants of the large, outlying farms, to whom he was directed more especially to appeal, greeted him with enthusiasm, and promised help in men and money with all the eagerness that even Tala could have desired. They knew it was the King alone who had made the desert land flourish. They knew that the King alone could secure them, whether against foes from without, in the shape of the invading Danes, or enemies within, whose dissensions in the Diet of the realm had not seldom proved even more fatal.

One brought out an old stocking, and poured the money it contained into Adolf's hands, saying, "Take it! It is the life of my wife and children, when I am gone, but I would give it all for the life of the land. The King's life is the land's."

One farmer's wife brought him her bracelets, another the silver ornaments she wore in her hair. "It is because of the King that I have them," said each in turn. "Let them go back to the King."

Where the men of the family were young and strong, they spoke little, but bent their heads gravely, and asked the time and the place at which the King expected them to meet him.

"We love the land; we know that the King loves it."

Where they were old and feeble, on the contrary,

they talked so much that it was hard to get away. Adolf's sense of the ridiculous was sometimes sorely tried. In their anxiety to hear the latest news and their extreme credulity, no tale was so wonderful that it might not find due acceptance. On one occasion, he told the tiresome patriarch of the village through which he happened to be going, that the Court physician had certified that already the wings of an angel were growing out of the King's shoulders. Within an hour, five or six persons came to make inquiries concerning the length of the feathers.

One and all treated him with distinction, as an honourable and an honoured guest, a gentleman in whom the King reposed confidence; who was therefore worthy of every trust.

Here and there he met a man who had been decorated by Gustav with the Order of his greatest ancestor, revived by him to encourage, throughout his dominions, the pursuit of that honest alchemy which turns clay into precious metal. Then indeed he was welcomed almost as though he had been the King himself. His passionate admiration of the master whose very name had become a talisman in the most distant parts of the kingdom gained in intensity with every step he took.

For, whatever Gustav's private vices may have been, there is no doubt that he was a good lord to the people. The first, for generations, who had been born and bred amongst them, and could speak to them in their own

language, it was he who had broken, without bloodshed, and at a single blow, the hated tyranny of the two great parties of the Hats and the Caps, under whom nothing could flourish except the base intrigues fomented by Catharine of Russia and Frederic the Great; it was he who had signalised his triumph by the abolition of torture; it was he who had filled the fields with labourers, the mines and factories with busy workmen.

As Adolf rode farther and farther into the northern province of Dalecarlia, as nature and man alike grew visibly wilder and wilder, he found that the sentiment of loyalty became more and more enthusiastic. In one rough village the peasants knelt before him, and almost kissed his horse's hoofs, weeping for joy.

"Look at our potato-plots!" they said. "It was the King who taught us how to plant potatoes, where nothing else would grow. What should we have to eat, if it had not been for the King?"

And it was all that Adolf could do to refrain from laughter. As he looked at the earthy faces of those men, furrowed with black lines like the unyielding soil in which they worked, as he touched (not without secret repugnance) their hard, misshapen hands, he thought with wonder of the dainty and at times effeminate appearance of "the little gentleman with the scarlet heels," and marvelled, not once nor twice, how such an one could have learnt the secret way to their hearts.

The scenery around him recalled the stories which

he had read as a boy of the wanderings of Gustav Vasa. It seemed to him that he was riding not only far away from everything he knew, but far, far back in time. The face of the earth had not altered. The peasants spoke the rude lingo of their forefathers.

The rivers had not yet begun to freeze, and boats were still needful to ferry over the lakes; but as he crossed the Lillelff the thin ice covered it already to the eyes of his fancy, and broke once more beneath the weight of the uncrowned King. Once again Barbara Stigsdotter let him down from the window by a long towel, that the treachery of Brun Bengtsson and of her husband, Arendt Persson Ornflykt, might be defeated; and once again the audacious driver carried him at full gallop across the frozen waters of Lake Runn, and the smoke from the copper-mines of Falun veiled him from the sight of men, as though a second Elijah were ascending the bank in his chariot of fire.

The memory of all these things was in the air. In the desolate country, where there is little or no progress in thought, life may stand still for centuries and yet keep fresh and strong. It is but yesterday in such places, though it may be long ago in the towns. Adolf, who had always thought that it was long ago, began to feel the romantic past close round him. All that he saw and heard encouraged the illusion. The solemn wind that swept the sound of the sea from the pine branches had lifted Gustav's hair, had murmured thus

in Gustav's ear, when he lay sleeping below them three nights together, hungry and thirsty but for the food the peasants brought him of their own scant substance. On "The King's Height," above the wild, wide, reedy marsh, still stood the tall fir itself that had sheltered the out-cast. Here was the very bridge under which he lay hidden. Speeding northward and ever northward, and flying far before himself on the wings of the Muses' galloper, Adolf crossed the ridges of the hills and saw the whole earth white with snow, while over it, on their wooden skates, glided the two dark figures of Engelbrecht and Lars of Kettilbo, the fleetest skaters of all the countryside. Over the Western Dalelf he followed them into the lonely village of Sälem, the last upon its shores, into that miserable hut at the foot of the grim Norwegian Mountains, where lay the King who was about to place them as an everlasting barrier between himself and the ungrateful kingdom that had failed to respond to its lord.

The rocks and trees, even the thundering waterfalls, whose arrowy shafts shone bright beneath the moon, were yet instinct with loyalty. The men and women kept something of the fixity of the great forests in which they had been reared. They had not changed their minds and forgotten, like the people in cities; to them Vasa was still alive in the young and gallant son of his house, who bore his name, who spoke his language and their own. Little need was there for Adolf to set forth to them that the Danes were the enemies of Sweden;

for more than two hundred years they had never thought the Danes anything else.

They laughed with savage joy when they heard him speak, they groaned at the very name of Denmark, they caught up stones from the ground and flung them southwards, they came in crowds to swear that they would lend a hand in the destruction of their ancient foes. They thought it was but the other day that Swedes had beaten them. The triumph of Gustav Vasa's men at Sönnebohed was a recent occurrence here. At night Adolf heard them singing in their huts—

“We drove the Danes to Brunbäck's wave,
Thus, thus, and thus!
And Brunbäck's waters were their grave,
Thus, thus, and thus!
Out upon Christian, dog and slave,
No Christian king for us!”

The words fell upon his heart and stuck there. He remembered the old legend of his house: how the tyrant, Christian, had ordered the execution of the two children of Sir Lindorm Ribbing, the elder of whom was eight, the younger six; how the little one, not understanding what had happened, said to the headsman in his baby accents, “Dear man, you must not stain my collar as you have stained my brother Axel's! Mamma will whip me, if you do.” The headsman flung away the axe and fled, but Christian's soldiers completed the work for him; and ever since, in times of tyranny—so

ran the tale—the spectre of a child, unseen by any save the destroyer, had warded off mischance from the chief of the Ribbings. He never believed the story before. Now, in the long, dark aisles of the forest, where no sound but the weird singing of the peasants roused the echoes at nightfall, he had no choice but to think it true. Was it the spectre of the child that preserved him in the Black House, where the firelight shone on the antlers and on the little fork of coral?

He was nearing the mines now. The trees were growing smaller and scarcer, the ground even more sterile. It was morning when he left the last of the firs behind him, and rode across a dreary tract of burnt and blackened heath. Such men as he met were little, swarthy, thick-set, with bony, long arms, and dull, blinking eyes. They were not likely soldiers, so he thought, but they were all going one way.

“To Mora?” they said, when he asked the road. “Yes, yes; to Mora, to meet the King!”

“It was just such creatures as these who travelled miles and miles to hear Vasa speak—to win his battles for him,” reflected Adolf. “I could think that I was going to hear him myself. What was his famous speech in the churchyard at Mora?”

As he was taxing all his powers to recollect, he came to the crest of a plateau, across which he had been riding for some time, and saw below him such a strange realisation of the scene his imagination had conjured up, that he stopped short, out of breath with sur-

prise. The ground was black with human beings, and from the open doors of a quaint little stone church with a copper roof to it, more and more came pouring out every moment. A single figure was standing, slightly raised above them, on the summit of a hillock just outside the boundaries of the churchyard. It appeared to be that of a miner, wearing the rough costume of the Dalesmen—a short black jacket, grey stockings, a round cap with a silver lining. He knew it all well. Many and many a time he had seen it in his boyish visions.

“Right over the hills of Essund, lying directly south, stood the low noonday sun. His dazzling light was cast upon the fields of snow. A fresh north wind was blowing, and the men of Mora think the north wind a good sign.”

The words of the old history that he had learned as a child came back to him. There lay the hills of Essund directly south; there was the low noonday sunlight upon the fields of snow, and the wind blew steadily from the north. There stood the strong deliverer.

Scarcely knowing what he did, between dreaming and waking, Adolf leapt from his horse, and, flinging the reins to a boy on the outskirts of the crowd, plunged into the thickest of it, eager to see and hear. The King's side face was towards him. He caught the magnificent profile clear against the sky, he heard the ringing tones of the commander.

“Men of Mora,” said the King, “I speak to you on sacred ground. The voice of Gustav Vasa is the voice

that you hear to-day. Once more the Danes are upon us; the stranger defiles the holy places. Once more the nobles have betrayed their trust. Once more the King appeals to the nobility of his people. He needs your hands to fight for him, your hearts to support him. Say, will you give them?"

There was a moment's silence, for something in the attitude of the man, something in the proud humility of his utterance, called for tears rather than for applause.

Adolf's own eyes were wet.

Then there arose a cheer, the like of which he had never heard, and never heard again. The earth rocked beneath him, and the sky over him.

It had hardly died away, and he was yet dizzy and bewildered with the wild echo of it, when a broken voice behind him exclaimed—

"The face of the King is as the face of an angel."

"Ay," said another voice, the tones of which recalled something to Adolf, though what it was he could not define, "the face of an angel! But he has two faces, you know."

"What do you mean?" said the first voice angrily.

"No offence," rejoined the other. "An accident of birth, that is all. But the two sides do not correspond. Look!"

The King turned round to speak to someone, and the fact that one side of his face was indeed different from the other struck Adolf for the first time.

CHAPTER IX.

TWO GENTLEMEN LAY A BET.

WEARIED as he was, for he had had but little sleep for some nights past, and had risen before daybreak, Adolf repaired immediately to his Colonel, who showed him a written order from the King, to the effect that he was to give him the verbal message from Stockholm, and to deliver up the papers and other effects with which he had been entrusted, as well as the diary of his reception in every village. This he did faithfully—though in his secret heart he was much vexed that the King had not sent for him in person. Two incidents, however, were omitted from the diary. He did not mention his uncle's conduct, nor did he allude to the strange encounter with the four men at the Black House, as he had called it, without thinking, ever since his interview with the beggar. He had promised Engeström that he would say nothing about the letter; and besides, it would have been difficult to account for his escape, without misunderstandings. This was the reason that he gave himself; perhaps another and a deeper one underlay his reluctance to speak.

The Colonel was standing, notebook in hand, in a

large barn or cow-shed not far from the church, busily enrolling those miners who had come forward, after the King's speech, to offer their services—the magistrates having resolved to equip a body of twelve hundred volunteers at their own expense. The atmosphere was heavy and malodorous, and Adolf had to wait some time; for the enthusiastic recruits were hustling and jostling each other in their eagerness to assume the white scarf, and some confusion prevailed. When his turn came, he was simply informed that his papers would be taken to the King at once, and that a lodging in the town had been reserved for him, whither he had best betake himself at once to await further orders.

There was an unacknowledged disappointment, a feeling of flatness about all this. It was hard to be spoken to once more as if he were a boy at school, hard to give up the rôle of knight for that of an insignificant pawn in this tremendous game. He had ridden into camp, conscious that he was a highly important person, without whom the war could not be carried on. Now that nobody seemed to think there was anything extraordinary about what he had done, he began to wonder why he had ever thought so himself, and to bless his stars that thoughts are not audible. A certain sense of humour was latent in Adolf Ribbing, which circumstances afterwards developed—he used to say that he had been frightened into fearing no one—but at this time he was keenly alive to ridicule, and there is no form of it more dreadful in the eyes of a

sensitive young man than that which attaches to one whose pretensions are out of proportion to his achievement. He had honestly believed that nobody else could accomplish what he had accomplished, and lo and behold, any fool could do it! Other aides-de-camp were spurring in from all parts of the country. They looked weary as he did. As for their lists, there was no difference that he could see; they had beaten up as many recruits, or more.

He mounted his horse again, and rode slowly into the town. His thoughts were all confusion. So late as yesterday he had been his own master and ruled many others into the bargain; now, even as a servant, no one on earth appeared to need him. A dim, unjustifiable suspicion of ill-usage fought with a growing conviction that nature had made him insignificant—that he never could be anything else. He found no stable seat upon the see-saw of his youth; now he was sent suddenly flying into mid-air, and now he strove in vain to rise an inch from the ground. He had no confidence in himself, and too much. A child gives, a man sells; but between the two there is a creature who flings away all that he has, and finding that he gets no acknowledgment because he has not set a price upon it, begins to wonder if his all be really what it seems to the world in general—a mere nothing—and to base such self-reliance as he may possess on what he will do in the future, not on what he has done already. He does not know—for only experience can teach—the worthlessness

of the most magnificent promise compared with the smallest actual fulfilment, but he is irritably conscious of building on a foundation that must be invisible to others, strong though it may appear to himself.

The crowded streets were lonely indeed to Adolf Ribbing, after the blissful solitude out of which he had come. The world was unaccountably full of people, he thought, and of noises; it made his head ache. The friendly indifference of a fir-tree cannot wound, but the indifference of a fellow-mortal soon becomes hostile. Here, every man was a fortunate rival; he knew, at least, who he was and what he had got to expect. And Adolf, who knew neither, longed for the fir-trees again.

It occurred to him to feel forlornly glad that Tala was not there. He recollected his little display of boastfulness to her. At this moment, probably, she was sitting upon the Reindeer's Crag, picturing to herself his glorious arrival, to the sound of trumpets. Of course he should never marry her now; he should die neglected and unknown, where all the neglected and unknown do die, in a garret. Much better so!

He found out his lodging at last—it was in a back street, with a back window that looked out on a back court; not a bad substitute for the garret as he conceived it. He threw himself on the bed, and fell fast asleep, rather expecting never to wake.

By the time he did awake, however, he was himself again—not the conquering hero who had got up in the

morning, nor the abject beggar who had lain down in the afternoon. A good meal still further restored him to his usual condition; and he had gone so far as to wonder whether there were such things as theatres in the good town of Mora, when a note from the Colonel was handed in to him.

With a fluttering heart he broke the seal and read—

His Majesty desires to see you at 10.30 p.m. at "The Vasa Arms."

His Majesty desires to see you. Whether this form of speech signified approval or disapproval, Adolf had no means of finding out, as he was too shy or too proud to ask. His nervous diffidence returned upon him with twofold force. He had looked forward to a special summons on his arrival, but nothing occurred; now, all these hours after, what did it mean?

He tried to reason with himself, but to small purpose. At his first introduction to Court life, a few months earlier, he had behaved with perfect ease. Brought up at a Military School in Berlin, where public opinion was by no means favourable to Gustav III.—returning for his brief holiday to a home where he was accustomed to hear his father's ironical remarks—Adolf had come prepared to find his sovereign's character fit food for mirth and mockery. Perhaps the very want of subservience with which at first he had conducted himself, attracted one whom flattering speeches wearied. In any case, the King treated the boy with marked distinction, and Adolf, yielding quickly enough, became

convinced that all the rumours which he had heard to the disadvantage of this "Prince of good fellows," were quite unfounded.

His father was dead. His mother, gratified in spite of herself by the kindness with which her child had been received, and not unwilling to let herself be conquered by his urgent representations, began to give way.

Then came the war with Russia.

Prevented by transient illness from following the King to the field, Adolf fumed and fretted at home. He was one of those who had heard Gustav boast that he would write his name on the pedestal of the statue of Peter the Great in Peter the Great's own city. When the defection of the troops rendered the fulfilment of the threat impossible, at the very moment of triumph, Adolf had no words in which to express his contempt for his fellow-soldiers, his ardent admiration of the man whom even such reverses as these could not daunt. He had joined the King immediately—with what consequences we have seen. Loyalty was become a consuming passion.

He longed and dreaded to be near his leader, almost as a lover longs for and fears his mistress. A word, a look of commendation would be heaven; but this he dared not hope for. In vain did he assure himself that he had done his best, that it did not become him to think of results. Enthusiasm had sapped his

independence. He felt as if a frown from the King would annihilate him.

It was some consolation—not much—to perform an elaborate toilet.

He reached “The Vasa Arms” long before the appointed hour, and hung about the gate of the courtyard miserably enough, thinking that he would give a hundred thousand riksdalers to go in and get the interview over, until the moment approached for him to enter, when he discovered that he would have given two hundred thousand only to stay without.

The yard was full of servants hurrying hither and thither with torches in their hands, their long flowing streamers and the glimmering candles in the lanterns which some of them carried striping and blotching the darkness. Overhead in the gateway, an old oil lamp swung to and fro.

Adolf was about to try and force his way through, when a couple of lacqueys ran full tilt against each other just in front of him, stopping the road.

“Out of the way, you fellows,” he cried imperiously, not sorry to vent his over-excitement in abuse. “Be-gone, I say! There’s no room for you here.”

“The more angels, the more room,” said the same voice he had heard in the morning.

Adolf looked round, but it was impossible to identify anyone in such a crowd, and the lacquey had swiftly lost himself among lacqueys.

“Room! room for His Royal Highness the Duke of

Sudermania!" shouted the sentinel who was guarding the gate, as he saluted.

Adolf doffed his cap and stood aside.

There was nothing for it but to wait now.

The brother of the King was to start that night for Lexand; so Adolf gathered from the remarks of those about him. His horse stood ready at the foot of the steps, a groom holding it. He came down booted and spurred, chatting affably to a gentleman of his suite, and got into the saddle; but no sooner did the groom let go the bridle than the horse, frightened perhaps by the glare of a torch that was suddenly whisked past its eyes, made a violent plunge and threw the Duke, who was not yet firm in his seat. He would have landed head foremost on the pavement but for Adolf, who caught him in his arms and thus broke the force of the tumble. In the hurry and bustle all round no one else had observed what it was that frightened the animal.

"I am much obliged to you, sir," said the Duke, laughing, as he extricated himself. "You have saved me from a bad fall. May it be my good fortune to save you from just such another, one day!"

He lifted his plumed hat and rode off over the Platz, the people cheering as he went, for the hero of Hogland was just then, for the only time in his life, deservedly popular. (They recollected how, at a critical moment, he had seized the match from one of his artillerymen and threatened to blow up his ship then and there, if

he could not get help.) Adolf was left staring stupidly after him.

"It is never permitted to anyone in heaven to stand behind another and to look at the back of his head," said the voice again. "It stays the influx from the Lord. Besides, that angel has one face, not two. You keep a diary; put down in it the date on which you saved him from a fall. It is to your advantage to remember; but he may think it is to his advantage to forget."

"It would be much to my advantage to know who you are," said Adolf, speaking rather loud and gazing now in one direction, now in the other. "This is the third time I have heard your voice, but you have the fairies' fern-seed—you walk invisible. I shall not look for you again. If you wish to continue the conversation, I must ask you to show yourself."

"You are wrong," said his interlocutor. "This is the fourth time you have heard my voice. You have looked for me twice, and the third time is lucky for looking. But not to-night, I counsel you. Wait until the moon has changed, say, for her three-and-twentieth changing. Look for me then, the third time!"

Of course Adolf looked immediately, but in the crowd behind he could distinguish no one, and he was too much afraid of being late for his audience to do more than glance round before he made his way in.

He found the King upstairs in the best parlour, seated at a rough wooden table near the fire, reading

letters. He did not even turn his head as the young lieutenant was ushered in, and from this fact, Adolf, while he bowed profoundly, augured ill, and instantly began to feel a desperate kind of satisfaction, as if he had got over the worst and should not mind now, happen what might.

"The new tenor at the Royal Opera has a bad cough," observed Gustav abruptly, after the lapse of some minutes. "They will not be able to mount Gluck's *Armida* for a week or two."

"Indeed, sire."

Adolf took no manner of interest in the new tenor at the Royal Opera. It was as if the King had said, "You are a silly boy, not fit for the serious business which I entrusted to you."

"The old Duke of Richelieu is very ill," continued the King, after another pause, still without looking up.

"Really, sire?"

The old Duke of Richelieu interested Adolf, if possible, even less than the new tenor. It was as if the King had said, "You are a silly boy, not fit for any serious employment in the future."

"You have never been in France, I think?" said the King.

"No, sire; nor have I any desire to go there at present."

"Why not?"

"Your Majesty has made Sweden too enjoyable."

Adolf was half amused and half annoyed to find

himself repeating a sentiment which he entertained with the sincerity of his whole heart in the glib compliment of a professed courtier.

The King smiled.

"You are quite right. It is not a good moment. The treasury is paying three-fifths of its obligations in money and two-fifths in paper."

"Sire, if the treasury were paying a hundred per cent., I would not change this country for any other."

The King lifted his large blue eyes, the pale colour of which contrasted oddly with the vividness of their expression, and fixed them full on Adolf.

"The Queen of France has wept," he said.

There ran through Adolf the same electric shock which had startled the rough populace but a few hours before. It tightened and stiffened his figure, so that he grew visibly taller, and stopped his breath.

"When may I go, your Majesty?" The words were scarcely audible, but they cried aloud in the eyes that answered Gustav's.

"There spoke the true son of the North," said the King. "Not yet! Not yet! We must see to our own borders first. Look to the *Groschen* and the *Thalers* will look to themselves! How have you sped? The contribution in money is larger than I hoped for. What was the disposition of the people?"

"Sire, they have but one wish—to beat the Danes—to die for your Majesty."

"Well!" said the King, with a careless gesture of

the hand; "those are two wishes, and quite distinct. How many from Lake Runn did you say?"

Adolf was taken aback. He could not remember, but he guessed boldly.

"Five hundred, sire."

"Four hundred and ninety," said the King, knitting his brows. "You must be more exact, young man. Still, they are coming in on all sides. We shall have three battalions at Mora. How did Carl de Geer receive you?"

Adolf blushed and remained silent.

"Forgive me, sire," he said at last. "Carl de Geer is my uncle."

"Oh!" said the King quickly. "He has a daughter, I suppose?"

Adolf looked up in surprise, but recovered himself almost at once and said simply—

"It was she who fired the beacon which brought many of the country folk to the royal banner, sire."

"Is it even so?" said the King. "Then is she a good daughter to Sweden, although a bad one to Carl de Geer. Was she alone?"

"Not, sire, upon that occasion."

"So Mercury played Cupid by the way," said the King. "I should advise you, for the future, not to confound those parts. Were there any other gentlemen present when Carl de Geer chose to insult my messenger?"

"There was one gentleman present, sire, to whom, in my judgment, the refusal of all the rest was owing."

"In *your* judgment!" said the King, with the faintest possible shade of irony; faint as it was, though, Adolf caught it, and would have given all he had to recall the expression. "Who was this gentleman?"

"Baron Essen."

"In my judgment, sir," said the King, "you make a mistake. Baron Essen is one of my few friends. He was with me in Italy. Times must have changed indeed, if he be found among my enemies. Tell me what happened?"

As baldly as he could, Adolf related all that had passed, while the King sat cross-legged, playing with the fringe of the long blue scarf of the Order of the Seraphim, which fell in a becoming manner across the silver brocade of his overcoat.

"You are not a good *raconteur*," he said, when Adolf paused, not because he had come to the end, but because he did not know how to go on. "I should doubt your having made a good speech. Some people can make speeches"—he glanced down again at the blue scarf—"and some people cannot. For myself, I distrust the people who can. For this reason, among others, I believe all that you say. Baron Essen has, without a doubt, gone over to the enemy. Whatever his price may be, it will have to be paid. I cannot afford to lose him; his estates are too large."

"Your Majesty has many worthier friends," observed Adolf.

"Where are they?" said the King, shrugging his

shoulders. "I was but a few years older than you are, when I thought myself very clever for saying to Monsieur de Marmontel, 'Men have few friends—men who are kings have none.' But I have proved the truth of it since, as I never intended to prove it."

He sighed heavily.

Something told Adolf that he ought to have gone down on one knee and protested; but he withstood the inclination and—the next moment—wished he had followed it.

"Have you any uncles at Gothenburg?" said the King, in the tone of one who resumes business. "Any uncles with daughters, I mean?"

"No, sire."

Did this imply that he was to be sent on to the beleaguered city? The blood sprang to Adolf's cheeks and the fire to his eyes. He waited impatiently.

"A good thing too!" said the King. "Gothenburg, I may tell you in confidence, is in very great danger."

"Sire"—the young Count began eagerly; but the King went on, without noting the interruption.

"I have just received the last despatches from Duretz. He begs for further instructions, but he must get on as well as he can without them. I dare not go yet myself; I am bound to Lexand—to Great Tuna—to Falun—to rouse the peasants there. I do not despair of fifteen thousand volunteers in the end, but I shall have to work hard; and the messenger would run too great a risk. There is no one whom I can trust."

"Sire," said Adolf,—and this time he found it easy enough to kneel,—“trust me! I will carry your instructions safely. I will defend them with my life.”

The King smiled good-naturedly, and shook his head.

“That is too precious to be thrown away on any such wild-goose chase,” he said. “Your mother is a widow, is she not, and has no other child? Young men are selfish; I have always observed that.”

“When your Majesty first risked life itself for Sweden, your Majesty’s mother was a widow.”

“Well answered, upon my word!” said the King, laughing outright. “He quotes my example against my precepts. And how about your uncle’s daughter, Sir Malapert? What would she say to it?”

“My uncle’s daughter is heart and soul with my father’s son, may it please your Majesty!”

“And how about myself?” said the King. His voice was gentle.

The room swam round with Adolf. Was it possible that the King really cared for him?

“Sire,” he cried, “if you knew”— He could get no further.

“I do know,” said the King gravely. “Forgive me, my dear Count! I wished to see if you were in earnest. I am convinced. You have appealed to me by my own youth; when I look at you, I see myself as I was. I can no longer resist your entreaty. Go, in the name of fortune, and may the luck of all the gods go with you!”

"You shall not regret the confidence that you have placed in me, sire," said Adolf, finding his voice with difficulty.

"Of that I have no doubt," said the King. He took up a flask which was lying beside him, uncorked it, and poured out the wine it contained in a stream on the table.

"This is the route," he said, tracing a zigzag line of crimson with his finger, upon the wood. "This red blot here is Gothenburg. There you will cross the river. If you meet the enemy, you must trust to your own wits to get through. They have not yet effected a landing, but they may contrive it before long. At this point you had better stick to the road; I have been told that it is wisest to do so, although it seems to be a round. You take me?"

"Perfectly, sire."

"If you stay long enough at Alengsab, remember to get a pair of silk stockings; they are the only wear for soldiers—in case of accidents, you know. Ask to see the Grand Chamberlain, Marshal Levenhaupt, at six to-morrow morning. He will provide you with money and give you the despatches for the General. Tell Duretz to hold out till I come, if the Danes batter down every spire in the city. You understand? The place is hard pressed, and Duretz is a sack of potatoes. I tell you this because you will have found it out for yourself an hour after your arrival. I look to you to keep up their courage. There is one true man among them, Lieutenant-

Colonel Hans Axel Fersen, the son of my old enemy, Senator Frederick. Take him this letter from me. Point out that it is sealed with the *fleur-de-lys*. Commend me to him! This"—he took an envelope from a half-open drawer at his side—"contains the brevet which makes you a captain. It was destined for that one of my lieutenants who should bring in most recruits to our army. I have much pleasure in presenting it to you, sir. If you can make Duretz hold Gothenburg till I come, you may ask what you will of me afterwards. No thanks! Thank me with deeds, not words. Farewell, my Mercury! The watchword at the gate will be *The Queen of France*. Remember!"

"You do me too much honour, sire," said Adolf, quite overpowered with joy. He kissed the hand which the King extended to him, and left the room hurriedly. As he was going downstairs, he met one of his acquaintances, Count de La Gardie, arm-in-arm with another gentleman of the Court.

"Ha, Ribbing!" cried the young Count. "Where are you off to?"

"To Gothenburg, with despatches," said Adolf, in a much louder voice than was necessary.

"Alone?"

"Alone."

"Lucky dog!" said his friend. "When shall we get there, I wonder? Well, good-night, and a prosperous journey to you!"

The door had hardly closed on Adolf, when the

other gentleman turned to the Count, and said, holding out his hand as he did so, "My seven hundred riksdalers, if you please!"

"I do not understand you."

"Is not that Count Adolf Ribbing, who told us the story of the prophetess?"

"It is."

"Did you not lay a bet with me, after Count Ribbing had left, in consequence of a disagreement between us as to his prospects? I said that they would be materially affected by that story; you, I believe, held otherwise."

"I do not see that you have proved your point. On the contrary, my dear fellow, it is you who owe me seven hundred riksdalers. The King has promoted him."

"The King has promoted him; yes. But he goes alone to Gothenburg. Have you never read the Second Book of Samuel, 'Set ye Uriah in the forefront of the hottest battle'? You will find the words in the 11th chapter and at the 15th verse."

"I never heard that David followed Uriah to the forefront of the hottest battle himself; that seems to me to alter the case."

"Oh, if you think David is going to pursue that line of conduct, I withdraw my demand for the present," said the other. "I am quite content to wait for awhile. We shall see."

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Gothenburg! Gothenburg! and *The Queen of France!* rang all that night in Adolf's ears. However, he was as prudent as well as a romantic young man, and before he went to bed he got pen and paper, and—smiling as he did so, at the recollection of the airy voice whose behests he was following—he made a memorandum.

14th September 1788.—Caught the Duke of S. in my arms as he fell from his horse. H.R.H. expressed the hope that he might one day save me from misfortune.

This he enclosed in a letter to his mother; there was no need to ask her to keep it.

The King, meantime, remained where Adolf had left him. When he had finished his despatches, he sat a long, long while, his gaze fixed thoughtfully on the fire. Sometimes it was full of marching armies. More often he only saw one face in it.

"The prediction is false," he muttered to himself. "The prediction is false."

When he was quite certain of it, the King seldom said a thing twice.

CHAPTER X.

GOTHENBURG.

A HAPPY man was Count Ribbing to take the road again. Travelling suited his restless mood just then. It gave him plenty of leisure for long dreams of the King and of Tala.

He was prepared to meet with tremendous difficulties; he met with none. Nature and man seemed to have entered into a conspiracy to send him gladly on his way. By day the frosty sun shone steadily; by night the people in the towns and villages sheltered him as though he had been their own child instead of a stranger. As he drew nearer and nearer to the coast, the equinoctial gales began to blow, and he fancied that he could taste already the saltness of the strengthening breeze.

Impatient as he was to arrive, he followed the King's directions to the letter, even when they appeared to lead him out of his course. It might have been about five o'clock one evening when a soft, full, intermittent noise broke heavily upon his ear, and he knew that he had come within sound of the Danish guns, the army lying far to the north. The spirit of silent fury braced

every nerve as he rose in his stirrups and shook his clenched fist threateningly at the sky; it seemed as if he had heard a shot fired at his mother.

He pushed on eagerly, and came within sight of Gothenburg about twenty-four hours later. A city of grey, flat air, relieved on still and dusky fire, lay before him. Above, a single star peered in and out of thin, torn, flying fragments of fleecy cloud. Tower upon tower, spire upon spire, soared up from the surrounding houses and drew the whole mass nearer to the low, overhanging sky. Beyond, the great grey waters stretched away and away to meet the dull horizon.

The sentinel, who was walking up and down in front of a drawbridge that led to the ancient fortress in which the General resided, hoisted his musket and uttered a challenge, when he saw Adolf approaching.

“*The Queen of France!*” said Adolf promptly, recalling his instructions.

The sentry lowered his musket, and signalled to the man in charge to open the gates. The bridge was quite deserted at that hour, except for a tall, dignified person, who stood leaning over the rail, gazing far out to sea. As he was close to the gates, he overheard the challenge and the reply, and, turning quickly round, confronted the King’s messenger as he came through.

Never did Adolf forget the keen impression of that moment. The stillness, the brooding twilight, the ethereal spires, had filled him with a sense of happy

awe. The face that looked upon him out of it all bore stamped upon the beauty of the features the mark of silence unbroken, of an inveterate melancholy. With the swift egotism of the young, Adolf thought that he himself should look like that if Tala were dead.

"Pardon me!" said the stranger, removing his broad-brimmed three-cornered hat. "I think you come from the King? It is possible that you may have some message for me. Hans Axel Fersen, at your service!"

"I have a letter for you, sir," said Adolf, producing it. "The King bade me commend him to you. Further, he asked me to point out to you that it is sealed with a *fleur-de-lys*."

"Did he indeed?" said the other, shrugging his shoulders. "His Majesty is often pleased to jest."

"More often than you are, I think," said Adolf, for the icy chill of Fersen's tone had not failed to strike him unfavourably.

"Did you mean to imply anything more than the literal sense of your words, sir?" said the Count, laying his hand on his sword.

"Nothing in life," said Adolf, laughing. "Your pardon, if I have by chance offended you; though why the King should not seal with a lily or with ten dozen lilies if so it pleased him, I am at a loss to imagine. What do you think of the state of the town?"

"That it will fall within a week, if the King does not come to the rescue in person. Duretz is only wait-

ing for the first opportunity to surrender without loss of personal credit."

"You do not say so," cried Adolf. "The white-livered, black-hearted brute!"

"I am not displeased to hear you use that expression," said Count Fersen, still very gravely. "It is, however, the duty of a subordinate to speak respectfully of his superior officer."

"Do *you* mean to imply anything more than the literal sense of your words, sir?" said Adolf, offended in his turn. He let the butt-end of a pistol peep out from his breast-pocket.

For the first time Count Fersen smiled.

"I am not acquainted with your name, sir," he said, "but I have told you mine, and I know you now, as I hope you know me, for a plain, honest gentleman, that means what he says and no otherwise. It was I who set you the example of distrust; but I am losing that candour which is the natural birthright of a gentleman in this accursed mouse-trap. Allow me to apologise."

He held out his hand.

The other took it with great cordiality. "My name is Ribbing, Adolf Ribbing," he said. "I think my father was an old friend of your father's."

"Then let their sons be friends also!" said the Count, bowing.

"With all my heart. It is indeed ridiculous that every word we say to each other should be a challenge, and every other word an apology, when we are going

to be shut up together like two men in a lighthouse." And Adolf laughed.

Count Fersen did not follow his example. He was by nature far too serious to be amused by anything, but the charm of his dignity was such that those whom he honoured with friendship never complained of the want of mirth in him—especially as he was careful to treat their jests with beneficent toleration.

"I have despatches for the General," continued Adolf. "Can you tell me whether I shall find him within the fortress or no?"

"You will certainly not find him anywhere else," said the Count. "He will no doubt accommodate you there; but should you have any time at your disposal, after your interview with him, I shall be much gratified if you will pay me a visit. My rooms are on the highest floor of the tower belonging to the town hall—the tower with the little dome and the gold cross on top of it. Do you see?"

"I see," said Adolf. "You have chosen an eagle's nest. That is the highest tower of all."

"The air is good," said the Count simply. He turned away. Adolf, looking back as he rode off, saw him still standing by the rail and gazing out to sea, the letter, with the seal yet unbroken, in his hand.

CHAPTER XI.

FERSEN'S TOWER.

THE streets through which Adolf passed were desolate. Early as it was, the shops had closed, and there were few loiterers to be seen by the way. Those whom he met wore long, pale faces, and led him to wonder if everybody in Gothenburg had a bilious complexion and a lantern jaw. They followed him with a languid stare of curiosity, but asked no questions, and answered as briefly as possible, or contented themselves with merely pointing a forefinger, when he asked them to direct him.

The Governor, General Duretz, a feeble, boastful man, with an eye like a weasel and an inanely beneficent smile, made such a negative impression, that Adolf, as soon as he had quitted his presence, began to feel doubtful as to whether he should know him again when they met the next day. Everyone about him spoke in subdued tones, and appeared to be in low spirits. The King's message which, even as he delivered it, roused the speaker himself "like the sound of a trumpet," was received with nothing but a silent shrug of the shoulders. No one uttered the word *Surrender*, but it was written on every countenance.

They were all very polite, and made a great show of regaling the ambassador on various dainties which, they assured him, were not to be procured every day. He had the best rooms in the fortress—after the Governor's—and two servants were placed at his disposal. When he contrasted the luxury of the whole place with the poverty-stricken appearance of the streets without, his heart misgave him. An utter absence of all curiosity as to the doings of the outside world struck him over and over again in those about him. They took no interest in anything.

“It is like a scene in a dream,” he said to himself. (Adolf was not, as a rule, fond of his dreams, and used the expression in an unfavourable sense.) “It looks like life, but there is none. It is all unreal.”

Involuntarily he lowered his own voice until he could scarcely hear himself speak. He felt as if some heavy morphia in the air had dulled his senses. There were frequent pauses in the conversation, and he grew dimly thankful when the long supper came to an end. Even then he was detained on one foolish pretext after another.

Some hours later he found himself standing on the threshold of the tower, which Count Fersen had pointed out as his abode. He was hungry for sleep, and yet he could not go to rest till he had seen once more the form of the only man in this dreary city who seemed to him a man indeed and not a shadow. He was weary, and yet, as he climbed flight after endless flight of cold

stone steps in the dark, he pleased himself with the thought that he should see human eyes at the top and hear the voice of one who was not afraid lest his own ears should hear him.

The steps ceased at last, and he came to a small landing, in the opposite wall of which, after he had groped about for some time, he discovered the handle of a door.

Once, twice he knocked, but there was no answer; then, emboldened by the silence, he opened it for himself.

A draught of air from a French window that stood open down to the ground immediately blew it to, and the noise brought the colour to Adolf's cheeks; but there was no one in the room. It was bare of all ornament, as he had, somehow or other, expected to find it. A gun hung over the mantelpiece, and a case of pistols and a sword lay on the table. Over the door a branch of sweet bay was suspended. The fire had gone out, but fragments of charred boughs remained, and the room was full of a faint, spicy odour, as if someone had been burning leaves of the same plant.

Adolf went at once to the window, which led to a small balcony. There, leaning over the fragile parapet, up at a dizzy height above the pointed roofs and gables all around, stood the Count in the same attitude as before, gazing out to sea, southwards. A field-glass lay beside him, but he was not using it. His thoughts, whatever they were, absorbed him to the exclusion of

everything else, for he had not heard the banging of the door, nor did he note Adolf's presence, although the latter was close beside him.

All through these long, spiritless hours, Adolf had been trying vainly to recollect Tala's features. At once, and without the smallest effort on his part, they flashed before him, and he forgot the stars, the sea, and Count Fersen.

For a few minutes he stood entranced. Then, with the vision in his heart, he stole away, trembling lest any spoken word should break it. Safe through the darkness of the night he bore it home to his lodging, and lost it only when he lost the consciousness of his own being in sleep.

CHAPTER XII.

BESIEGED.

THE days that followed were dreary days enough.

Adolf worked hard at the fortifications, where there was more than enough for anyone to do that had a mind; but it was hopeless labour. No one appeared to think that the city could, by any manner of means, hold out beyond a week at farthest. A cloud hung over the whole town. The garrison murmured against its leader. The citizens grumbled at the unusual contributions expected from them, when meat would soon be a rare luxury and bread itself was growing scarce. The few who did not complain let it be seen with sufficient clearness that this was only because they no longer thought that their representations would be of any avail.

One thing alone made amends to Adolf for the general depression, and that was the friendship of Axel Fersen. The two young men were opposite enough in character to become intimate almost at once, from a correct though unreasoning instinct that, if they did not, they could never afford each other any satisfaction as mere acquaintances. Yet there was a sense of

mystery about Fersen, which only deepened as time went on.

During the day they seldom chanced to meet. Why he was in Gothenburg at all, Adolf could not even conjecture. He seemed to have little or no intercourse with the Governor, and he was not to be found on the outworks nor among the fortifications. Once or twice, when they came across one another by accident in the neighbourhood of the river, Adolf thought the reasons that he was particular to give for being there somewhat eccentric.

But this was only while the light lasted. Evening after evening they held long discussions up in the tower. It was usually Adolf who talked for the two, but Axel had a conversational way of listening; and neither of them remarked this. Axel had seen plenty of active service; Adolf had a lively imagination, was well read for his years, and a keen politician. When he had asked Fersen a few questions as to the American War of Independence, for instance, he would launch into picturesque descriptions of the battles he had never seen, his friend cordially assenting, merely revising a detail here and there; and what time the stars were well on their way towards midnight, and the lamp had begun to burn low, Adolf would retrace his steps, with a gratified sense that he had acquired more knowledge concerning that episode in history; while Axel went to bed reflecting on matters that were as far from Gothenburg—or from America, for that matter—as is the

North Pole from the South. And yet to both, night after night, the keen contests waged in recollection and in fancy offered strange compensation for the slack, disheartening warfare in which they were engaged all day, and more than once or twice the little room was grey with dawn before they could make up their minds to leave off fighting.

"Is it true," said Adolf, "that you and His Excellency, Count Stedingk, were the only two of our nation whom the United States had decorated with the Order of Cincinnatus, and that the King would not allow you to wear it?"

"Quite true," said Fersen. "Poor old Stedingk minded the prohibition more than I did; but then he was badly hit in the leg at the storming of the fortifications of Savannah. He wanted something to prevent people from looking at his crutches, I suppose. But, after all, what is a bit of ribbon—when a man gives it you?"

Adolf laughed.

"Half the theatres in Paris decorated Stedingk in effigy with all the Orders under the sun; and as for me, the King wrote me a letter, which I prize far more than any plebeian honour of that kind," Fersen continued. "He said the Americans were in revolt against their lawful sovereign; that I had no business to accept a favour at the hands of such people. He was perfectly right. In the nine years that have passed since then, I have become convinced of it. But I was only

twenty-four at the time—not so very much older than you are now, my dear Adolf; and if a man is not a fool at twenty-four, he will never be wise at forty.”

“What did you think of the English?” said Adolf.

“Oh, good enough for soldiers!” said Axel, “but they have not a single general amongst them. Even Cornwallis makes the most unaccountable mistakes. I wonder they did not shoot him as they did poor Byng, *pour encourager les autres*. There’s a young man in the navy who will make himself a name some day or other, though.”

“Who is that?”

“Nelson—Horatio Nelson, I think the name is. He is three years younger than I am, and the bravest little fellow alive—boarded an American letter-of-marque, when the sea was raging so that nobody else dared attempt it; boarded a Spanish battery at the head of two or three seamen and took it—goes straight ahead and never obeys any orders except his own. There was but one opinion about him among all the men that I spoke with.”

“I wish we had him here,” said Adolf, with a sigh. “And I wish with all my heart that the third Gustav would take a leaf from the book of his brother and cousin, the third George, and shoot Duretz.”

“Amen!” said Fersen, inclining his head gravely.

As they became more intimate, the two friends drew nearer home of an evening.

Sometimes they spoke of quaint, stork-ridden Stras-

burg, where Axel was a student, comparing it with Berlin, where Adolf had grown to manhood under the somewhat oppressive shadow of the Great Frederick.

Sometimes they wandered to Italy, whither Fersen had accompanied the King, discussing the famous occasion when he compelled the pope to receive his visit on Christmas Day, and caused Mass to be celebrated in Stockholm and the Lutheran service in Rome, at the very same hour.

"It was strange to see the face His Holiness made," said Axel, laughing at the recollection, "when His Majesty, who had just been present at the celebration of High Mass in St. Peter's, invited him to assist at our service on equal terms, because he was the head of the Swedish even as His Holiness was the head of the Italian Church. I thought one of the cardinals would have died. Upon my word, I was sorry for the old fellow."

"Did you see Bonnie Prince Charlie?" asked Adolf.

"I did," said Axel significantly.

"And what did you think of him?"

"I thought the English had some reason to object to him—almost as much, indeed, as the Countess of Albany."

"Do you think he is really Grand Master of the Templars and head of the Teutonic Order both in one, though nobody knows it?"

"So they say."

"Why should the King have courted him as he did?"

"How can I tell?"

"They say he wanted the Count of Albany to make him Coadjutor, and then, at his death, our King would have united both dignities in his own person. He would have got back Livonia again from the Russians, because it properly belonged to the Teutonic Order, and given it to Duke Charles for a duchy?"

"Maybe."

Adolf felt that he knew all about this affair now.

Sometimes he questioned his friend upon the brilliant *fête* which took place when he was a youth of twenty. Then the whole Court of Sweden had represented the Fair at St. Germain, and Axel, disguised as an English jockey, exhibited a knowledge of horsemanship which bewildered all his contemporaries. But Axel was more inclined to be communicative about the performance of *La Rosière de Salency*, two months afterwards, in which he and the lovely sister whose hand Duke Frederick desired in vain appeared as a shepherd and a shepherdess, their father enacting the part of a country bumpkin, and their uncle, the Grand Venerer, that of a bailie. It was the same year that Axel held the field against all comers in a tournament which lasted three days, but of this he seemed to recollect very little.

Adolf was full of curiosity about the French Court also, but on this subject Axel was more reserved than on all the rest put together. "He would answer one question, perhaps he would answer two," as someone said of him at a later date, "but not a third."

"What sort of man is Baron de Staël?" inquired Adolf one evening.

Axel gave a peculiar smile.

"Baron de Staël is Baroness de Staël," he said. "And Baroness de Staël is Mademoiselle Necker—worse luck for the Swedish embassy! Among ourselves we call her Madame de Chicogne," and, as if he felt that he had said too much already, the Count changed the subject.

Those were pleasant hours when they talked, but as time wore on the shade of melancholy which Adolf had noticed on his friend's face from the first grew deeper and deeper, and even his own mercurial spirits failed to hold out against the all-pervading mournfulness.

September passed into October.

The sky was darkened, the rain fell in torrents.

The Danish lines were drawing closer and ever closer; still invisible as they were, they seemed to coil themselves round Gothenburg and stifle it.

The great East Indiamen lay silent and lifeless in the docks, no longer answering with a single gun the thunder of the Danish warships as they passed by.

From the Danish camp loud shouts and cries of triumph, the cause of which was quite unknown, filled the hearts of the defenders with terrified foreboding, when the scouts came in with the news. Was it only a ruse, a trick of war, to cheat them into believing that their last hope was gone? Or had the besiegers really heard of some tremendous defeat, and was this the

reason that the scouts looked in vain for any trace of the King?

There was no active fighting as yet. The Danes were clearly trusting to time, to famine, and to a certain influence within the walls, to do the work for them.

Duretz had withdrawn almost all his outposts, and concentrated the troops on the citadel. He seemed to have but one thing at heart—that was the defence of the New Bridge, by which Adolf had entered, by which alone retreat was practicable.

On the night of the first of October, Adolf confided to Axel, rather shyly, that he had urged Duretz to give him fifty men, and let him attempt a sally.

“Ah!” said Fersen, showing considerable interest. “When did you ask him?”

“It must have been about ten o’clock. He had only just come out of his room, lazy hound!”

“I put the same question to him an hour before,” said Fersen; “but I found him in bed. Of course he refused?”

“Of course.”

“You were wrong to think you could do it with fifty, though. It would take two hundred to be effective.”

“It might take two hundred to be effective, my dear Cincinnatus; but if there were more than fifty, it would not make me a knight of the new grade of the Order of the Sword which the King instituted the other day.

And be a knight of the new grade of the Order of the Sword I will, or I'll die for it!"

Fersen smiled at the younger man's enthusiasm.

"Is that the Order which the King declared that neither his brothers nor himself would accept unless the army decreed that they should do so?"

"The same. Duke Charles got it for the battle of Hogland, you know."

"A queer fellow that! Do you think that he is really loyal to his brother?"

"I never thought he was his brother's brother at all before," said Adolf; "but I confess that Hogland has changed my opinion. It was a fine action, was it not, Axel? You know more of these things than I do."

"Very fine indeed," said Fersen quietly. "You are restless to-night; what is the matter?"

Adolf had risen for the third time since he entered the room, and strayed across to the window, as if he found it easier to breathe there.

"You will think me very foolish," he said, without turning round. "I should be ashamed to confess it but that I can say more to you, Axel, than to anybody. You recollect that great big private, who always whistled when he was on guard in the morning? He was the only man who ever whistled or sang in this God-forgotten place."

"I recollect him perfectly."

"This morning I never heard the whistle. I saw his wife afterwards. That is all."

Fersen was silent.

"I talked nonsense about the Order of the Sword. It was that which made me speak to Duretz," continued Adolf. "It seems as if I could not go on with this, unless I have a chance of shooting and getting shot at."

"You will have plenty of chances of that kind very soon, I should think, without troubling Duretz about them," said Fersen, rising and laying his hand kindly on the young man's shoulder.

"It is very hard to wait," said Adolf. "I was sorry for that woman. And what can a man say to a woman, Axel? It is of no use. She declared that he had not enough to eat."

"She should not have been here at all," said Fersen. "Most people sent their wives away before the storm broke. Quite right too."

"Mine would never have gone."

"Your *wife*?" said Fersen, with a puzzled look.

"My wife that will be," said Adolf. "I always think of her as my wife. I could not call her by any other name to you; you know things as they are. And when I have been talking to you, I often dream of her, though never at any other time. Why is that, Axel?"

But Axel did not answer. His hand had fallen from Adolf's arm, and he was gazing out to sea again, southwards.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE SEALED LETTER.

It was not the first time that these sudden fits of absence had surprised Adolf. Any allusion to the Court of France was almost sure to bring them on, and Ribbing leapt to the conclusion that his friend was head over ears in love with some beautiful French lady, whose dainty, delicate name he would have given the world to discover. At the same time, he was baffled by the fact that Axel would, now and again, fall into deep abstraction, when there was nothing whatever in their talk, so far as he could see, to account for it.

One day, partly in the hope of probing this mystery, partly from the eager desire of sympathetic discussion which is common to youthful poets and lovers, our hero, blushing a good deal and feeling more like a fool than he had done since his arrival at Mora, submitted to Fersen a copy of juvenile verses addressed, of course, to Tala de Ger. The effect was different from anything that he had expected. Fersen read them through with the utmost gravity, returned them with the assurance that they were quite beyond criticism, that he considered Count Ribbing a first-rate poet, while he felt himself

honoured more than ever before by his friendship, and requested a copy immediately.

"I would give all my experience in the field to have written one of those stanzas," said he.

For a moment Adolf thought he was joking, and then he recollected that Fersen never made a joke. He was much gratified, for Tala had laughed at the verses—and Fersen knew more of the world than did Tala. On the other hand, it is to be said that Adolf had not often seen him with a book in his hand, unless it might be a treatise on Military Tactics. He did not recollect this at the moment, but that cunning vanity which lures us on to desire the repetition of a compliment, led him to say—

"Nonsense, old fellow!"

"I meant what I said," said Axel, frowning. "I am not in the habit of saying things that I do not mean."

And Adolf felt abashed and ashamed at his patron's simplicity, copied out the verses for him in his neatest and spikiest handwriting, and ransacked the Swedish language for rhymes to "friend."

This took place on the night after the conversation recorded in the last chapter. On the following evening Adolf entered Fersen's little room, hot and excited.

"Duretz is a traitor—a traitor!" he cried.

"I thought we were agreed as to that on the first occasion when I had the pleasure of meeting you," said

Fersen, as if the announcement did not very greatly concern him.

"What do you think I have just seen, down by the New Bridge?"

"Duretz's household gods, going across it in cart-loads?"

"The very thing! How did you know?"

"I did not know. I guessed."

"I learnt what they were by the handle of a great china vase that was sticking out. I saw it in the corner of the room, the night I dined there. If there had been anyone else on the bridge I would have tried to stop it, but there was nobody. So I picked up a stone, and broke the handle of the vase off. He won't adorn his banqueting hall with that any more, anyhow."

"And you got away without a word?"

"It was too dark for them to distinguish; and besides, I ran for it," said Adolf. "There were about twenty of them, so far as I could see."

"That looks bad," said Fersen reflectively; "besides, it is not the only thing."

"I went straight to Duretz to demand an explanation, but they would not admit me. Duretz is ill."

"Oh!" said Fersen, "he is ill, is he?"

"Very ill indeed. I should not wonder if he were dead to-morrow, and buried the day after that—with military honours—in Denmark. But, jesting apart, Axel, how long shall we endure this?"

"Until it pleases His Majesty to arrive, I suppose. You do not propose to desert, do you?"

"I do propose to desert the Governor. What has he ever done to make us faithful to him? Why not organise a rebellion among the soldiers, Fersen, turn out Duretz and take command of the place yourself? There would be some hope for us then."

"Rebellion in face of the enemy? Impossible."

"Why?"

"It is against all the rules of war. For my own part, I would no more consent to such a measure than I would consent to offer terms to the Danes. Oblige me by not alluding to the subject again."

"But the King's orders!"

"Duretz has obeyed them to the letter. Gothenburg has not fallen."

"But if it falls?"

"Then we fall with it. We shall have done our duty."

"You sit up here between the sea and the stars, Cincinnatus; you are too deep and too high for me," said Adolf. "I cannot, for the life of me, understand why we should treat a man who is a Dane at heart and a traitor to his country with any regard whatever. If it were not for you, I would shoot him down the next time he showed his weasel face in the streets."

"And you would deserve to be shot yourself as a traitor for doing so. By a parity of reasoning, you

would be at liberty to shoot the King, if his idea of what was for the good of the country did not happen to coincide with yours. A subject has no right of private judgment. You must respect authority as constituted by law."

"Well," said Adolf, "you have more experience than I have. I yield my private judgment to you, who, on your own confession, have not got any. I may be the last of patriots—I think I am—but you must allow that I am the first of friends, Axel?"

"I will tell you one thing for your comfort, if you will give me your word of honour not to reveal it."

"Agreed!" said Adolf. "But is it worth wasting a word of honour upon? To whom could I possibly reveal it, when I never speak to a soul except yourself—unless I had the fancy for taking vegetables into my confidence, which possessed that barber who told the reeds King Midas had ass's ears?"

"I never heard of him," said Fersen. "It was highly impolitic. Spies are often lurking in desert places. I see the sense of all you say; but I must, nevertheless, request you to give me your word."

Adolf laid his hand on the cross hilt of his sword, and gave the oath at once, as required.

"There was a sealed enclosure in the letter from the King that you brought me," said Axel. "It is only to be opened in case of Duretz's serious illness or death."

Adolf rose and saluted, as if in the presence of a general.

"That alters the case," he said. "We can afford to wait. •

"There is nothing else for us to do," said Fersen, sighing; "my appointment would be highly irregular, since I have the honour to hold a commission in the French Army at the present moment. Only extreme necessity and the absence of anyone whatever qualified to undertake the post could justify it. I cannot, under present circumstances, assist at any council of war. The position would be an awkward one, and you are witness that I do not desire it. But I warn you that nothing can preserve us eventually. We might prolong the struggle, you and I; the King himself could not save the town now. The time has gone by for that. It is only a question of falling with honour or falling without it. The rations are running short. Three days of blockade, and they will have to kill all the horses. I do not want to discourage you, Count, but if you have anything to leave, I should advise you to make your will. There is an excellent notary living at No 5, Torbern Strasse. I drew up mine with his assistance yesterday."

"But—if the worst come to the worst—could we not cut our way through?" asked Adolf, breathlessly.

"Cut our way through twelve thousand men?" said Fersen, shrugging his shoulders. "We can cut our way through to heaven, if you mean that."

"Are they really twelve thousand?"

"Duretz gives out that there are twenty thousand, and as long as I could get anyone to listen to me I gave out there were nine; but twelve thousand is probably about right."

Adolf had never before heard his friend speak so cheerfully nor at such length.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE THIRD OF OCTOBER.

THE morning broke, gloomy and overcast. Adolf began to think that he hated the autumn.

It was with an anxious heart that he went down the long corridor and inquired after the health of the Governor.

"His Excellency has passed a good night, has eaten a good breakfast, and is feeling considerably relieved."

Adolf, who had passed anything but a good night and eaten anything but a good breakfast, did not participate in this sensation.

He went straight to Axel, whom he found on the balcony, sweeping the far horizon with his glass. All at once he seemed to concentrate his attention on a particular point in the middle distance.

"Look there!" he said, handing the glass to Adolf, and pointing.

"What is it?" said Adolf. "I see a man running—running as hard as he can go. What is that in his hand? A white flag! What does it mean?"

"We should have watched the bridge," said Fersen. "Fool that I was, not to think of it! Duretz has got a

message through to the Prince of Hesse. The white speck is a handkerchief—a flag of truce.” Fersen sank his voice nearly to a whisper, as he added, “For Heaven’s sake, keep it quiet!”

“I should say rather, proclaim it upon the house-tops, as we have a good opportunity of doing up here!”

“No,” said Fersen. “I have thought the thing over, and we must wait. Duretz has thoroughly corrupted the troops under him, and we do not know how many others besides. If we spoke now, we should be overpowered at once, and the people, whom he would try to bribe with promises, would believe that we had calumniated him out of jealousy; it would take the heart out of the few who still remain faithful, and they would relax their vigilance. Besides, Duretz has just written to me to say that the Prince of Hesse threatens to set fire to the town unless we surrender, and to ask my advice. I merely quoted the King’s last words to you in my answer, and he will not have the face to propose it again just yet.”

“But if he announces a capitulation without consulting his officers?”

“We will denounce his treachery and seize the gates. Unless the people rally to us, we shall be arrested and shot for mutiny; but we must risk that. After all, die we must, one way or the other—whether by the Danish guns or our own signifies little.” He laughed cheerfully.

Adolf, who had not enjoyed making his will so

much as Fersen, wondered whether the lady in France were married. It appeared that a man who loved a lady in France looked upon death in a very different light from a man who loved a lady in Sweden.

“Could you draw up some sort of proclamation, in case we wanted it?” said Axel. “You write so easily, and it is difficult work for me. I have reason to think that the offices of the *Gothenburg Star* would print it for us, if we put a little pressure upon them.”

The proclamation was drawn up, and the rest of the day passed just as many and many a day had passed before.

Adolf admired and envied the way in which Fersen went about his usual avocations in his usual manner, quite undisturbed. He himself was restless and could not settle. All the vague impressions of dislike and discomfort that had been floating in his mind since he arrived took definite shape. He had thought that he could never weary of the sound of waves,—for he loved the sea as one born and brought up beside it,—but now he was tired of that monotonous chorus to his own monotonous thought, and would have done anything to stop it, if only for five minutes. Every yellow, hollow face in the streets filled him with loathing, so that he wished he were in a desert; and the very noise of a footstep jarred on his nerves as if it had been a blow.

He longed most ardently for the moment when Duretz would announce the capitulation and put an end to this state of suspense; but Duretz did nothing

of the kind—and as no one, except Fersen, had observed the departure of a messenger for the Danish camp, there was no stir nor excitement in the town.

Only the rations were rather less than they had been the day before—and Axel pointed out to him that the soldiers hardly grumbled at all.

“I wish the King would come,” said Adolf, with a sigh, that stormy evening, when he and Fersen had sat silent longer than they were wont, whilst the wind, which rose as darkness fell, howled in and out among the towers and spires, and drove the rain in fierce, gusty splashes against the window. “I could die better if he were here.”

“You need no king to help you to do that, I should hope.”

“Your old Republican of a father is strong in you to-night,” said Adolf, seizing the shadowy pretext for a laugh. “What a strange sentiment for you, who are *plus royaliste que le roi!*”

“Ah—h! But not *plus royaliste que la reine,*” said Axel, smiling in his turn.

“The Queen? The poor old *Statue du Commandeur?*” said Adolf, alluding to Sophie-Madeleine by the title which her shy rigidity had gained for her throughout the kingdom. “What can you mean?”

“I spoke French,” said Fersen.

“I do not know French as well as you do, my friend, but I never supposed that you were speaking Swedish.”

"Who, when he says *la reine*, could think of any except?"—said Axel, with lightning in his eyes.

"I for one," said Adolf, in a low, happy voice. He was thinking of Tala, her bright eyes and her white furs. "Every man has his queen. Were the Queen of France Helen herself, she could not prevent that. Depend on it, Hector thought Andromache fairer! You have a queen, Axel; I know you have."

"Yes," said Axel. "If we live to get out of this hole—but that, after all, is impossible—I shall show her to you, one day. Then she will be yours also."

"To my mind," said Adolf, "the world is divided, not into Royalists and Republicans, but into men who follow a king and men who follow a queen. I knew, from the first moment I saw you, that the thought of a woman guided your life. It was because the thought of a woman guided mine already that I understood it. Ah, how the wind shakes the tower! What a free thing it is! Liberty, liberty!"

"I cannot bear the word," said Axel, with sudden fierceness.

"I think it is the king of words. When the great free breath without calls to the little free breath within me, I long for freedom more than for anything else in the world—'A free king of a free people.' That's why I love our King."

"And that is why you will cease to love him," said Fersen bitterly. "Kings are the laws incarnate, and

liberty is not for earth—nor for heaven either. The devil made it, to be the law of all the lost.”

“Then would I rather be the devil’s freeman than the slave of God,” said Adolf.

“Hush! What was that?”

“Nothing.”

“It sounded like a cry.”

“Only the wind.”

They were silent for some time longer.

“You cannot think of death when the King is by. He makes you feel three times more alive than anyone else that ever I saw. We should not have to die at all, if he came here,” said Adolf, with an outburst of candour.

“Do you think the King himself will live to be old?” said Fersen. “I do not.”

“Why?”

“There is a doom upon the race.”

“You believe that rubbish?” said Adolf scornfully.

“I do not say that I believe it, but many people do; the King himself among the number.”

“How can you be so credulous?”

“I come of a Scotch family, and the Scotch hold many of these opinions. Our name was Macpherson originally.”

“Fleming told me, the other day, that he was descended from Titus Quinctius Flaminius, the Roman Consul,” said Adolf sarcastically. “Perhaps that’s why his hair is red. For me, I am descended from Adam.”

“Laugh as you will!” said Axel. “It is not on

such a night as this that you will make me give up the old prophecies. Was it for nothing that I mistook the wind's voice for the voice of a human creature just now?"

"I know what you mean," said Adolf, more thoughtfully. "I felt it when I was riding through the woods of Dalecarlia. I could have believed anything, if you had told it me then—'Wild Huntsman' and all! But what is this story of the doom on the King's family? I never heard it."

"You never heard the vision of Charles XI.? Impossible! Every child in Sweden has learnt it by heart, these hundred years."

"You must remember that I went early to school. I never knew it. Tell me!"

"I have heard the King tell it himself," said Fersen, "and that was something to hear indeed. But I have not a good memory, and you must pardon me if I do it scant justice. Stir up the fire! The wind blows through the chinks and crannies of the walls, and these old stories make one cold."

Adolf vigorously thumped the coal until the sparks flew up the chimney, and Axel began—

"It was an autumn evening like this, and old King Charles XI.—peace be to his memory! (the King always says 'Peace be to his memory!')—was sitting by the fire, as we are sitting now, with his dressing-gown and his slippers on, in a room of the old palace overlooking Lake Mœlar. Count Brahe, his chamberlain,—the an-

cestor of the present man,—was with him, and his doctor, Baumgarten, and they were talking of nothing particular—very idle talk.”

“Much like ours, if you will forgive me!” said Adolf.

“Suddenly the great hall of the estates, which is situated, as you know, in the opposite wing, began to shine resplendently, as if there were a light in every window. They all three saw it at once, but no one spoke.

“‘I will go into the hall myself,’ said the King at last. He had turned pale, but was quite composed. The Count and Baumgarten followed, each with a candle in his hand. They roused the porter, who found the keys and showed them into the gallery, which was always used as an antechamber. To their astonishment, the walls were hung with black.

“‘Who ordered this gallery to be hung with black?’ demanded the King.

“‘To my certain knowledge, no one has entered it since the last time I had it swept out,’ said the porter. ‘And then it was panelled just as it had always been.’

“A confused noise made itself heard from the hall.

“‘Stop, stop, sire!’ exclaimed Count Brahe, as the King stepped forward.

“‘Allow me to go and fetch twenty of your life-guards,’ cried Baumgarten, as a gust of wind blew out his candle.”

“Axel, you invented that on the spur of the

moment," said Adolf, trimming a candle which had been put too close to the window and was guttering dolorously.

"The King never heeded the words of his companions. He took the key from the trembling hands of the porter and said, 'Let us go in!'

"The hall was lighted with an immense number of torches, and hung in black from top to bottom. Every bench was crowded with senators all dressed in black. On the raised throne in the centre sat a dead man with a crown on his head; the blood was flowing from his wounds. To the right of him stood a child, and on the left was an old, grey-haired man. At the foot of the throne stood a wooden block, and an axe lay beside it.

"At a sign from the President the door opened, and several young men came in, their hands tied behind their backs. An executioner, veiled and masked, followed them. Their leader stopped when he came to the block in the middle of the hall, and looked at it with supreme contempt; but the dead body quivered, and fresh blood flowed from the wounds. Then the young man knelt down and stretched out his head, and the axe glittered and fell with a thud. A jet of blood spurted out on to the steps of the throne and mingled with that which streamed from it. The head, rebounding on the bloody pavement, rolled at the feet of Charles.

"Hitherto he had kept silence, but now he regained his power of utterance.

“‘If you are of God, speak!’ he said, addressing the President. ‘If you are of the other, leave us in peace!’

“‘Charles the King!’ said the phantom slowly, ‘this blood shall not flow under your rule, but it shall flow when five reigns have gone by. Woe! woe! Woe to the House of Vasa!’

“The forms grew indistinct and gradually vanished. The torches went out; the hangings, the head, the block, disappeared.

“But when the King looked at his slippers they were stained with blood.”

Fersen made an impressive pause.

“But when the King looked at his slippers, they were stained with blood,” said Ribbing, in the absent tone of one whose ear had apprehended, but not his brain. “Hark! what was that? Your phantom had a real voice, Axel. I heard it cry.”

“I heard nothing,” said Axel testily.

“Again, again! Listen! It is a cry. It is not the wind. You were right. Someone is calling. Hark!”

“I hear,” said Fersen. “It is not the wind. Unbar the shutters!”

“It comes from the west gate, down by the Castle drawbridge,” shouted Adolf, trying to make himself heard above the clamour of the storm, as he threw open the window and held it with both hands to prevent it from being smashed.

“Are you sure? Is it really in that direction?”

“Quite sure. If it came from the other, we should

hear more distinctly. The wind blows from the sea. Axel, Axel, if it should be a messenger!"

"The sentries must have heard it. Why do not they let the man in? Stay! what was that?"

"The great clock of St. Bridget's striking twelve."

"This is no living voice we hear," said Axel, in low, awestruck tones. "None hears it except you and I."

"But they *shall* hear it," cried Adolf vehemently; and, making a trumpet of his hands, he screamed with all the force of his lungs, "*Gustav! Gustav! Gothenburg!*"

A faint cry was borne back to him, but no words could be distinguished.

"Do not make a fool of yourself," said Axel, who had shaken his mind free from the influence of Charles XI. by this time. "If it is a messenger, we had better go to the Castle and see why they have not let him in."

Ribbing dashed madly down the hundred steps which led from the top of the tower to the bottom.

"The door is locked," he cried, "the door is locked! They have bolted us in." He stamped his foot with fury.

Fersen, descending more leisurely, tried the door in his turn, but the lock would not give.

"I shall climb down from the balcony."

"You will do no such thing. Try the other doors first. The rooms are empty, I know, but they may be open, and we might make an attempt from the lower windows."

"They are all locked," cried Ribbing, as he rattled one after the other, in vain.

Fersen had gone quietly upstairs again, and was making a rope of his bedclothes.

"It is not more than sixteen feet to the next balcony," he said. "You must let me down by this; if it holds—if I get down in safety—I will unlock the door for you."

"Forgive me, Axel, I must go first," said Ribbing passionately.

"We will draw lots," said Fersen, with imperturbable politeness. "One of us must be left behind, you see. There would be no one to hold the rope steady, else. I have two sous in one of my clenched hands. If you choose the hand in which they are, you go down first—if not, I. Right hand or left?"

"Right," said Adolf, in desperation.

Fersen opened his hand. There lay the two sous.

"Good! Here is my pass-key. Put it in your pocket. Run round—unlock the door with it before you go—that is all I ask!"

Adolf took the end of the improvised rope, and let himself cautiously down over the railing.

"Do not think about it," said Fersen, "and do not look down. Shut your eyes! Let go when you get to the end of the rope!"

Adolf did as he was told, recommended his soul to Heaven, and was surprised to find it still in his body a moment after."

"Scramble down by the pipe!" shouted Fersen, leaning far over the balcony. "Wave your handkerchief when you get to the bottom!"

Adolf found the pipe, embraced it valiantly with arms and legs, and slid unhurt to the ground.

Having got thus far, he waved his handkerchief as directed, receiving a congratulatory cheer from his imprisoned companion, rushed round to the front of the tower,—unbolted—flung open the door, threw the key inside (for it would not stand open against the wind), and dashed off at full speed to the Castle. He thought that he had heard a distant shout at the very moment when his feet touched the earth. Others must have heard something too, for by this time all the world was awake, and people were pouring out from every house; but they could know no more than he did. He did not wait to ask questions; he ran.

Just as he came within view of the west gate and the quay, a loud unmistakable cry went up.

The crowd surrounded on all sides a solitary mounted figure, bowing to right and left of him. He rode a gaunt, bony hack, and his cloak was draggled and splashed with mud. His uniform was that of a common soldier. A man with a torch ran in front.

By the light of it, Adolf saw the face, and as he saw it, his heart almost stopped beating.

It was the King; but he looked like a king who had come to die.

CHAPTER XV.

FERSEN WATCHES.

ABOUT an hour later, Axel and Ribbing were both in attendance at the palace, where the King was holding a consultation with several of the leading officers, who had been summoned in haste to meet him. He had promised to address the Municipality on the morrow, that he might lay before them the results of the marvellous activity displayed in the course of the last month, during which he had moved from place to place with such swiftness that the British envoy, who came to Stockholm to look for him, lost eleven days in the search—Gustav's own Council not being able to tell where he was. Arriving late at Alengsab, he had left his carriage there and ridden on, post-haste, alone; but he had been compelled to wait by the drawbridge for an hour in the furious tempest, before anyone recognised him.

Wild excitement prevailed throughout the town. The common people, who were gathered together in crowds without the palace, sent up cheer after cheer. Within, the agitation of those present was better controlled perhaps, and even more poignant.

The most exaggerated rumours were everywhere in circulation.

Duretz was to be fined—exiled—imprisoned—beheaded in the public square.

The King had mustered seven thousand—nine thousand—sixteen thousand Dalecarlians.

The Danes were breaking up their camp.

There would be a battle on the morrow.

There would be a *sortie* this very night.

So the tongues wagged, and the younger and older courtiers alike conjectured and predicted. A whole band of them, including Baron Wrangel and his friend, La Gardie, arrived shortly after the King, but they seemed to know little more than the denizens of Gothenburg—beyond the fact that this delay had been caused by Gustav's tremendous effort to enlist fresh forces in every direction—which forces were expected to come up on the morrow. They themselves had been sent on in advance, but the King had ridden straight through their camp in the night, *incognito*, and without stopping.

They appeared to be in the highest spirits. The many corridors of the palace, long empty and silent, resounded with their uproarious laughter and their snatches of noisy song.

As for Adolf, he was half mad. After the endless days of wearisome depression and monotony that he had spent of late, this strong dose of life went to his head. He laughed, talked, sang, shouted, boasted of

his escape by the window, until Fersen stood aghast, scarcely able to recognise his companion. Men's ears were open for any marvellous tidings. The tale was listened to, demanded again, rapturously applauded. And all the time he was making a buffoon of himself for the rest, Adolf had an odd sensation at the back of his heart that the world would come to an end that night.

From time to time the door opened, and one of those within issued forth. Many were the attempts made to extract information as to what was going forward there, but in vain. Each officer shook his head and hurried away. Two or three conversed together for a short time and then returned; their faces, when they came out again, were graver than before.

The feeling at the back of Adolf's heart took on a sharper edge. It seemed as if there were two creatures in him—a wise man and a fool. The fool talked louder and more absurdly every moment, the wise man smiled and whispered, "Let be! It will all be over to-morrow. I only shall survive." The fool found other fools around him; the wise man sat alone. Adolf wondered whether there were any other wise men behind the other fools,—men who had seen the King's face as he saw it,—but he did not ask questions, from an instinct that the world would crumble to bits at once if he began; and he avoided Fersen, seeing that there were no fools in Fersen.

Some time had elapsed when the King's valet brought

out a message that he did not require the attendance of his suite.

Curiosity got the better of fatigue for a little while; then fatigue overmastered it, and the group began to melt away, one by one. Wet through and weary with the long ride, they withdrew to their several apartments.

Among those who were left, the talk became more and more ribald, the laughter more frequent; Adolf was still the first to lead it.

Axel stood with folded arms, leaning against the balustrade, looking down into the hall. His reputation stood high enough to protect him, though it might have gone ill with any other man who chose to abstract himself in this way. If he had few friends at the Court, he had no enemies; he was, indeed, universally liked and respected, in spite of a reserve of manner which forbade intimacy.

His keen eye noted the different councillors as they went in, and he had no difficulty in identifying them as they passed out again, singly or in pairs.

"They must be all gone now," he said to himself, as he saw a man in a furred cloak slowly descending the staircase. "That was the last to enter. It is like Duretz's walk, but surely he would have recognised me. Hullo! There goes Oxenstiern. The council must be over then, in sober earnest. Good-evening, Count!"

"Good-evening," returned Count Oxenstiern, and

hurried down the steps as fast as possible. It was very evident that he had no desire for conversation.

Axel resumed his position.

A few minutes later Count Bonde-Trolle came out, leaning upon the arm of Baron Sparre. They were too much preoccupied to return Axel's bow, as they passed swiftly down the staircase.

"There is only Lœwenhielm left now," said Axel to himself, as he continued his idle watch.

He had not long to wait.

The council-chamber door was violently slammed to, and the President of the Senate strode from the room, his brow dark and an angry flush on his cheek. As he did so, a burst of laughter from the young people round the fire at the end of the corridor made the roof ring again. Whether he heard it or no, Axel could not have told; but he pulled his hat down over his forehead and descended the stairs rapidly, as the rest had descended before him. Shrieks of mirth followed.

Axel turned round, displeased by this unseemly behaviour. Only his cousin, La Gardie, Adolf Ribbing, Baron Wrangel, and a young fellow named Clas Horn were left.

"Baron Wrangel," he said, addressing himself to the eldest among them and pointed to the door, "the King is in there, alone. Have we the right to disturb His Majesty?"

It was as if he had pricked a bubble. The laughter and the loud talking stopped instantly; no one at-

tempted to revive it. All the fools fled, and the wise men sat still in their places.

Adolf, though he would not have lifted his little finger to bring on that moment, experienced a sense of lightness and relief now that it had come. He was lying at full length on the floor, his head on his hand. Glancing up, he admired Axel's superb attitude.

"When you have died the glorious death that you are always dreaming of, my dear Cincinnatus," he said lazily, "how handsome you will look!"

"Yes," said Baron Wrangel. "He is not dependent on colour. His profile is magnificent. Men with regular features look remarkably well when they are laid out. Are you practising for a monument, Count?"

"No," said Adolf. "If I were, I should lie like a crusader. They understood the profession best;" and he suited the action to the word and crossed his legs accordingly.

"Bravo!" murmured Clas Horn. "But I intend to have a bust on mine."*

"Your legs are not your strong point, my dear fellow; we are all aware of that," said Wrangel. "How did you know that the King was alone, if I may ask, Count Fersen?"

"I noticed everyone who went in; I have seen each man come out again."

"It is very odd that the King should stay there all by himself," said La Gardie. "He must be tired out. He has ridden two hundred and fifty miles since the

day before yesterday. Perhaps he left the council-chamber by another way."

"There is no other exit," said Adolf. "I know the room well. He must come out by this door."

Silence fell upon the little group.

Clas Horn rose and bade them good-night.

"What o'clock is it?" said La Gardie, after a long pause.

Wrangel pulled out a huge gold watch, and consulted it.

"It must be about one, as nearly as I can reckon."

"Then you mistook the hour of the King's arrival," said Axel to his friend. "It must have been eleven, not twelve."

"I daresay," said Adolf, smiling. "I was in no condition to count the strokes carefully."

Another quarter of an hour went by.

"It is very strange," said La Gardie. "Did you ever know the King shut himself up alone like this before?"

"Never," said Fersen.

"After all, what are we waiting for?" inquired Wrangel.

No one answered the question, but no one stirred. Adolf could have borne to wait indefinitely. The luxury of keen emotion after the blunt despair of the last week delighted him—the end would come soon enough. He was almost sorry when the handle of the door turned, and the King stepped out.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE KING SPEAKS.

THEY rose respectfully and made way for him, as he came towards the fire.

Gustav was naturally of a full colour; even the fatigue of the last month had not diminished it, although his eyes, usually so bright, were dull and void of any expression. He went straight to the mantelpiece, leaned both arms upon it, and hid his face in his hands, as if he saw no one and fancied himself alone. It was but a moment, as time passes on a clock, before he raised it again, but that moment seemed longer than all the hours that had gone before. Adolf, who stood facing Axel, lifted his brows; Axel shook his head mournfully.

"Ah!" said the King, in a whisper, glancing round him as he spoke, "so the rest have gone. The rats and the sinking ship! They do well."

He paused; then added, as if it had struck him, for the first time, that he was talking not to himself but to others: "If anyone had told me that I should find four men faithful to their King in his hour of adversity, I should have named those whom I now see before me.

I am gratified; I should only insult you, gentlemen, were I to say surprised."

All four bowed low. Adolf dared not trust himself to speak. La Gardie said, in a voice that he could scarcely control—

"You may depend upon us, sire."

"I am convinced of it," said the King. "Let me request you to be seated."

He seated himself, and signed to Wrangel and to Axel Fersen to take the two arm-chairs opposite. La Gardie drew a three-legged stool, which stood near, into the circle; Adolf sat down in the shadow of the chimney corner, and, resting his elbow on his knee and his chin on his hand, watched the King's face intently.

"I desire to hide nothing from you," the King continued. "Our position is desperate."

The words fell like lead on the stillness; yet, the next minute, Adolf recollected that he had known this all along.

The King went on as if he were rehearsing a lesson, the meaning of which did not concern him.

"England and Prussia are the only allies to whom we might reasonably look for help. I have sent special envoys to each Court, but I have not as yet received any answer from the respective Cabinets—nor do I expect it. Hugh Elliot, the British envoy who came to me at Carlstadt, is full of hope. England, however, has not recovered her full strength; she is still bleeding

from the wounds given her by her unworthy sons in America, and she will do nothing to involve herself in war. As for the King of Prussia, he is, you know, my blood relation." The King smiled.

Adolf, in the chimney corner, shook his clenched fist. A great longing to shoot the King of Prussia overmastered him.

"France?"—

It was Axel Fersen who spoke.

"France is too busy with her own affairs." The King sighed. "She is in a position to need assistance rather than to give it. My six thousand Dalecarlians are brave fellows, but even so we are far outnumbered, and it is doubtful whether they can arrive in time to effect so much as a momentary diversion. What is your advice, gentlemen? Shall we remain here and die? Or shall we surrender?"

Adolf bounded upon his seat.

"That is a word I never thought to hear your Majesty pronounce," said Axel.

"It is impossible for us to save Gothenburg," said the King, weighing each syllable, as if he wished to let it sink far down into the hearts of his hearers.

"It is impossible for us to leave it with dignity," Fersen rejoined.

"Yes, yes, impossible!" cried Adolf, finding relief at last.

"Impossible!" echoed La Gardie.

"Impossible!" said the Baron, more leisurely.

For the first time, a transient smile flitted across the King's countenance.

"This is a very different council of war from the last that I held," he observed.

"There cannot be two opinions upon this matter, sire," said Fersen gravely.

"You would not have said so, my dear Count, if you had been with me in the earlier part of the night. Duretz implored me to surrender; there is no word but that strong enough to express his abject entreaties. When I found that all the other officers were unanimous in favour of his proposal, I felt myself compelled to hold a Diet, at which only one person was present."

"But that person, sire, was a host in himself," said Adolf, laughing. "And the Diet he held came to the same conclusion as that which is now sitting?"

"*Parbleu!*" said the King, and snapped his fingers.

He threw back his head proudly; again the lightning shock of those blue eyes set Adolf's heart dancing. He asked for nothing but that life should end, then and there, before that moment ended. In a flash, he thought of the room with the twisted shadows of the antlers, the firelight gleaming on the fork of coral, and wondered at the difference. Now, death appeared to him as full of glory as though it were his marriage. He heard the King's voice like some sweet instrument of music, tuned in a heavenly dream.

"If we die," the King was saying, "we will die like men of a royal race. We could not fall in a more

noble cause. We are born to a high destiny; the eyes of Europe are upon us. In fire we vanish like the Phoenix, and from our ashes new fire will arise. Our mother, Sweden, shall bewail us; we will have such a funeral pyre as becomes the sons of the Vikings. Your ancestors, Baron Wrangel, have sat upon the throne of Pultava for two-and-twenty generations. Your burying shall not shame them."

"I have not lived like twenty-two kings, sire," rejoined the Baron, with a bow. "It is honour enough for me to share the funeral expenses of one."

Something ironical about the tone in which this was said jarred upon Adolf, but the King smiled.

"The expenses will be borne by the larger number of the citizens, I believe," he said. "I have given orders that all who value life above honour should leave Gothenburg to-night, and on foot. I am curious to see who remains."

"But is it possible, sire, that they should leave to-night?" asked Fersen.

"It is much more than possible, it is necessary. They were very willing to leave, I can assure you, but they disliked the notion of walking. When they found that I was inexorable on this point, great pressure was put upon me to consent to the passing of carriages; but that would take too much time. I was compelled to refuse, though I incurred the risk of becoming more unpopular than I am. No matter! If we give our lives, the *canaille* may well give their legs. Even then, the

bargain is far from an equal one. I have decreed that all who wish to leave must be on the other side of the New Bridge by three in the morning, that is, in two hours' time. Five minutes later the bridge will be no longer in existence. I hate those cowards—I cannot breathe freely till they are gone."

"You have held it out as a threat, sire? You do not really mean to blow up the bridge?" inquired La Gardie, with a startled air.

"I mean to do what I say," returned the King. "The bridge will be blown to atoms before sunrise."

"It is mad," Wrangel muttered, half to himself.

The King waved his hand towards the door.

"There is still time," he said, with suave politeness.

"You mistake me, sire," Wrangel answered haughtily, "if you think that anything would induce me to cross that bridge, except in your company and that of my—friends."

He had noticed the quick shrinking back from him of the three other young men.

"I have reason to believe that my brother-in-law, the Prince of Hesse, will attack in a few days' time," the King went on, as though there had been no interruption. "He is sure to have got wind of the approach of the army from Dalecarlia, and he will not wait to let them come up. Now, if we demolish our only means of retreat, he will see that we are in earnest, whatever happens. The train of gunpowder is laid, is it not, Count Fersen?"

"It needs but a match, sire, and the bridge will be blown to pieces."

Adolf looked at his friend with amusement. So this was the meaning of his long and mysterious visits to the neighbourhood of the Göta!

"Who will set fire to the train?" said the King. They all sprang forward eagerly.

"I claim it as my right, sire," Axel said, in his most musical tones.

The King waved his hand, as though he deprecated enthusiasm.

"One is enough," he said. "Count Fersen, I cannot give you the preference. These other gentlemen have not had the same opportunity, but their devotion equals yours. The risk is great, of course; but scarcely greater than that which we all accept by remaining here. If I survive to-morrow, let him who carries out the task successfully—if he survive to-night—ask of me whatsoever he will, even to the half of my kingdom! How long does it take to reach the place where you have laid your train, Count?"

"Not more than half an hour at most, sire."

The King mused.

"Come to me in the chapel, when the clock strikes again," he said. "I must request you to enter one by one, at an interval of five minutes. I shall make my choice there."

He bent his head with a grave salutation, including all those who were present, and strode away down the

corridor in the direction of the steps which led to the chapel.

The young men remained standing, until he had closed the door behind him, when La Gardie said, laughing nervously—

“His Majesty might have chosen at once, I think.”

“His Majesty has chosen,” said Wrangel, *sotto voce*, to his companion—and glanced at Adolf.

La Gardie shook his head impatiently.

“You are insane on this subject. Why should he keep us all kicking our heels here, if that were the case?”

CHAPTER XVII.

THE KING CHOOSES.

"How shall we go in?" inquired Wrangel.

"You take precedence," said Fersen quietly. "You have royal blood in your veins. I follow. La Gardie, your ancestors on the father's side had land in Sweden before the time of Christian the Tyrant, had they not?"

"If all my mother tells me be true," La Gardie said.

"Our friend must go before you, then, Count Ribbing."

Adolf laughed and agreed.

He had strolled over to the window. The prolonging of this strange night was very welcome to him. There was a sudden lull in the wind, and the storm had fallen. The stars shone here and there, not large nor full, but very clearly.

"It is as if someone had pricked the sky with a diamond-pointed pen," Adolf said to himself. He threw the casement open, and leaned far out, sucking in the damp, soft air with delight. To his surprise, he saw two lights down below, and they were moving forward evenly.

"Look, look!" he exclaimed aloud. "There is a carriage driving round to the steps. The King said none was to pass."

His companions crowded instantly to the window.

"He must have known of this one," said Fersen. "They would not dare to bring it out here else."

"Whose can it be?" cried La Gardie.

"Bring the lamp!" called out Wrangel. "The courtyard is full of people. What's that?"

"A detachment of the Guards?"

"It is, it is," cried Adolf. "Those are the Blues. Nobody could mistake them. But how silently they are forming up!"

"What can it mean? Who is it?"

"Who is this coming out, cloaked and muffled like an old woman?"

"I can tell you who it is," said Fersen meditatively. "You are quite right, Adolf. It is an old woman. It is Duretz."

Ribbing glanced at his friend, and laughed out loud again. This King did things as he liked them to be done.

"He was going to have surrendered to-night. The Prince of Hesse had threatened to burn the town if he did not."

"They are taking him safely across the river. It is more than he deserves; upon my word it is!"

"He ought to have been shot like a dog," observed La Gardie.

"That happy lot is reserved for us," said Baron Wrangel, with a sneer. "I suppose the King thought that he must make a distinction."

They watched the carriage roll away, closely surrounded on all sides by the silent Guards, and then returned to the fire. A heavier stillness seemed to have settled down upon the doomed palace.

"I wish we had some wine," continued the Baron, yawning. "I shall never be able to keep awake."

"I have a flask of brandy at your service," said Fersen, producing one from his pocket and handing it across.

"Does the King never go to sleep, and does he never want anything to eat and drink?" asked Adolf.

"He wears us all out, I know that," said Wrangel. "Imagine what we had to go through at Falun! We had been riding day and night, night and day, posting about in all directions, making speeches, seeing illuminations, dancing till we had not a leg to stand on, because the filthy miners must needs entertain us at a great ball; and just when we thought it was over, for a few hours, anyhow, nothing would suit the King but to put on a blouse as black as a chimney-sweep's, and go down the worst of the copper-mines, deeper than anybody had ever gone before, to drink success to the money-grubbers at the bottom! Yah, how foul it smelt!"

"But how they shouted, when he came up again!" cried La Gardie. "How they dragged the horses out

of the carriage! I thought the poor beasts would have been strangled! How they tore round the town with him! And how the volunteers came pouring in afterwards!"

"Yes," said Wrangel, "there were twenty thousand all told."

"Twenty thousand!" said Fersen, in surprise. "His Majesty said six!"

"He was obliged to refuse fourteen thousand of them provisionally—*provisionally*, you understand," said Wrangel, with a sinister laugh. "There were no weapons. If you had seen them drilling with Charles XII.'s old muskets! My word, it was a funny sight! And his officers were as queer as the artillery. Two old captains that nobody ever heard of before—Willenkröna and Föberg—their united ages must amount to three hundred at least."

The effect of this spectral army was not enlivening, somehow. Again the conversation languished.

"What shall we do to keep our eyes open until the clock strikes?" said La Gardie, with nervous eagerness. "Tell stories? You are a good hand at that, Axel. Begin, for goodness' sake! 'Once upon a time'"—

"You had much better go to sleep, if you will allow me to say so," Fersen replied. "We shall need all the rest that we can get. Do not be afraid! I am a light sleeper, and I am able to wake at any hour that I pro-

pose to myself. If you will trust the matter to me, I will call you five minutes before the time."

"Willingly," said the Baron, measuring his full length on the ground at once. "I have been on horseback twelve out of the twenty-four hours. I never refuse a good offer."

"I should be another man if I could forget myself for a few minutes," La Gardie murmured.

"Here is an arm-chair for you," said Fersen. "Put this cloak over your knees. No, thank you! I shall not lie down."

The young man took it, and fell asleep almost at once, as did the other two. Adolf only remained awake. He was far too happy to need rest. A man who is blissfully dreaming, with his eyes open, dares not trust himself to the chance that he may go on dreaming when they are shut. But he was lost in a reverie no less deep than the slumber of his associates when Fersen touched him on the arm, and he understood, with a start, that time was up. La Gardie awoke readily, but it was hard to rouse Wrangel.

"Lead the way, Adolf," said Fersen. "You know the palace best."

They traversed the corridor in silence, and descended a stone staircase at the other end of it. The spirit of dumb excitement possessing Adolf was very strong. He did not say a word. La Gardie spoke constantly, in short, excited, half sentences, as if he must provoke

someone else to answer. Wrangel took no heed of him whatever, and Fersen replied in monosyllables. A small door at the foot of the steps let them out onto the roof of the chapel, the foundations of which were laid considerably lower down the hill than those of the palace. They shivered and drew their long cloaks closer round them, as they felt the rush of the night air. There was only room to walk one by one. Some rough steps cut against the walls of the tower ended in a low cloister, lit by a torch that was flaring smokily in the draught, caught in an iron ring on one side of the entrance to the chapel.

In the doorway stood the King, a long blue mantle, worn only on State occasions, falling back from his shoulders. The jewels of the crown of Sweden flashed and gleamed on his forehead. On his breast shone the bright silver star of the Order of the Seraphim. A moment, and he turned back again into the chapel. Wrangel followed him and the door closed.

The other three waited, with chattering teeth, in the draughty cloister.

"That was well done," Adolf whispered, with exultant eyes.

"Yes," Fersen said indifferently.

"Are the dead as cold as that, Axel?" said La Gardie, touching the wall with his finger.

"Not at first; afterwards—yes."

"I feel as if we were going to our own funeral," said La Gardie.

"Another!" said the King's voice from within.

"My turn!" whispered Fersen. He lifted the latch and entered.

"I am glad that it is my turn next," said La Gardie, drawing closer to Adolf. "I would not be left here alone. What shall you do?"

"I shall not be alone," said Adolf. "I have a thought that is always with me." And he smiled gravely.

"You said that like Axel. I could have sworn that it was his voice."

"Perhaps it is."

"Where do you think that we shall be when we are dead?" said La Gardie irrelevantly.

"Under the earth and over the stars, I suppose; but it concerns us very little."

It pleased Adolf to feel how much older than La Gardie he was, as he gave utterance to this magnificent sentiment. But the voice from within spoke again, and he was left by himself.

He wondered intently whether, at that moment, Tala lay asleep, dreaming of him. He wished she might. He hoped that she was not awake. Over her thoughts he could not have any power; but if she were asleep, might not this tremendous will of his to be remembered compel an image of him upon her brain? He set him-

self to desire it with such strenuous endeavour, that when his own summons came, he felt, for the moment, bewildered and exhausted.

He entered the chapel quietly enough, however, closing the door after him as the others had done. A blast of chill air seemed to come down the nave to meet him and to fly howling up behind. The chapel was very old and rough and small, hung with faded, ragged banners—brown, crimson, yellow—that had waved in many a battle where Sweden's soldiers had perished and been victorious. It seemed as if they longed to flutter freely in the breeze again, to be once more the winged symbols of a host, instead of flapping, idle and purposeless, at the mercy of every chance gust. They smelt mouldy. As the wind blew one of them against his cheek, Adolf shrank back with disgust, as though a bat had touched him. The light from a small lantern, set upon the altar, shone through the rents and holes in them. His three companions were kneeling upon the altar steps, their heads bowed on their hands. In front, against a pillar, stood the King. The flag that waved above him was blazoned with the Three Water-Lilies. Adolf advanced to the foot of the steps and there paused. The King addressed him in a low, clear voice.

“As you shall speak it when you stand, a few hours hence, at the bar of your Creator, I call upon you to pronounce His name.”

A dead silence followed. Adolf returned the King's look.

"Speak!" said the King at length.

"Sire," said Adolf, "I have obeyed your command. I have pronounced that Name where only, at such an hour, it is meet to pronounce it, in the heart and in silence;" and he also bent his knee beside Fersen. It might have been a moment or two before those even, judicial tones fell on his ear again.

"Eric Wrangel, you have uttered, with a light laugh, that Word which is King of your King. I will have no hand in sending you one moment earlier than may be to the death for which you are so ill prepared. May grace be given you to repent, in the short time that is left! For you, Axel Fersen, you spoke it, as every true man should, on your knees. Yet there is an earthly name which you revere more. I dare not hasten an idolater before the great Tribunal. For you, La Gardie, you said that Name as though it were any other; you did not even understand the question put to you. You are yet a boy, and this high errand is not for you. You only, Adolf Ribbing, revered truth in the letter, as your friend, Axel Fersen, did; and in the spirit, as he did not. Yours be the task! Let us sing the Te Deum together before you go. I sang it after my first victory; I will sing it before my last."

He took the crown from his head, and laid it, with

a gesture of deep humility, upon the altar. Was he thinking of the day, sixteen years before, when he led the Te Deum, standing in the midst of an enthusiastic Diet, called together after that bloodless revolution, by means of which he had mastered his realm?

The five strong voices were raised in perfect accord, but Adolf heard only his own. A kind of wonder filled him that he should never hear himself sing again. When it was ended, he kissed the King's hand, and left the chapel. At a sign from Gustav, Axel followed him quickly.

"Axel, this is almost certainly the last night of my life," said Adolf. "What did the King mean by that allusion to you?"

"His Majesty is often pleased to jest," said Axel, shrugging his shoulders, just as he had when Ribbing delivered the King's message to him at their first interview.

"It was an odd moment to choose for a jest," said Adolf; and suddenly there came back to him the words he had overheard at the great meeting, *He has two faces.*

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"Will you give me my seven hundred riksdalers now?" inquired Baron Wrangel, somewhat grimly, as he came out of the cloister, arm-in-arm with La Gardie.

But the young Count shook his head.

"Not till to-morrow. After all, Baron, it was a fair test. Had you been silent, you might have gone."

The Baron screwed his lips together.

"Had I kept silence, I should have been but a dumb dog. Had Ribbing laughed, he would have shown a proper spirit, fit for the enterprise in hand. I know these tricks."

The King remained alone by the altar, engaged in prayer.

CHAPTER XVIII.

BELOW GROUND.

THE streets were still full of pale, silent, terrified people, as Fersen guided Adolf through them.

Outside an empty, shuttered-up house, not far from the river, he stopped, removed a loose stone in the pavement, and led the way down a rough, wooden staircase into a coal-cellar beneath, motioning to Adolf to pull the paving-stone into its place above them and leave one end slightly tilted.

"It is like being buried first and killed afterwards."

Axel assented indifferently.

"*Fi donc*, how dirty! I could find it in my heart to wish that you were a housemaid, Axel."

"Hush! Stand on this step—so—there is no room for two."

"Is that the water flowing? What a strange, hollow sound! I cannot see a single step before me. Where are you, Axel? Was one of your ancestors a cat?"

"Here is the gunpowder," said Fersen, taking Adolf's hand and placing it on something rounded and small.

"Here is the first barrel. Now for the match! You hold it so."

"How shall I know when to light it?"

"You will hear the hour strike. There is a church close by."

"Farewell, then!"

"No. I am going to stay with you."

Adolf felt annoyed. In very high wrought moments, the useless fidelity of another person is often irritating. He wanted the stage to himself.

"Listen," he said, speaking slowly, so as to control the least sign of impatience. "I have no intention of dying. The King promised me what I would. There is one thing that I want more than life, Axel, but I must have life to get it. *I have no intention of dying.*"

"I daresay not."

"Then leave me."

"I have no intention of leaving you."

"And what is to become of the King?"

"The King may fight his own battles."

Adolf reflected an instant; then he shot the last arrow that remained in his quiver.

"And there is someone else who needs you. Forgive me, Axel; if we were not buried alive down here, nothing should make me say it. Is she to fight her own battles too?"

There was no answer. A heavy sigh fluttered the darkness.

"Well?"

"Good-bye," said Axel; and their hands touched.

Crouched up in a heap by the side of the barrel,

Adolf heard the retreating footsteps of his friend,—the cautious removal of the stone,—and, as he adjusted the roof of the prison again, conquered a wild, momentary impulse to call him back.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE MAN IN THE BLACK CLOAK.

Not long afterwards, the people yet left in Gothenburg were startled by a terrific noise.

A heavy cloud of smoke which hung over the river had but just dispersed, when one of the sentinels descried a man on horseback, in a black cloak, making violent signals from the opposite bank, close to the ruined bridge. He immediately reported the fact to his superior officer, who reported it to the King, who ordered that every assistance should be given, and that the man should be brought at once to the palace, if he succeeded in crossing.

Meanwhile, the signals of distress had become more and more impatient. It was clear to the little crowd which had gathered round the sentry-box, that the man in the black cloak, whoever he might be, was greatly agitated by the discovery that the bridge no longer existed, and desired that a boat should put out to him. But, not to speak of the fact that the current at that particular spot was deep and strong, no one cared to make himself a mark for a body of Danish sharpshooters, who were now descried at some distance. The

crack of their muskets was already audible. They had evidently ridden hard in pursuit of the man in black, whoever he was; and though they had not succeeded in overtaking him, a few minutes more must bring them up. The attack would begin soon enough. It was a pity to waste life beforehand. It was a pity to weaken the defence. It was a pity the man could not get across, but it would be a dreadful pity to risk anything now, when everything must be risked later on. So they contented themselves with watching. Already the balls had begun to fly about this dauntless rider. Presently his horse dropped.

For a moment they thought that he was killed. Disentangling himself as best he might, he ran quickly down the bank, threw off his cloak, and plunged into the stream. A hail of bullets made little fountains all round, but none touched him. Once—twice the waters closed over his head, but he emerged again, still swimming vigorously. The bystanders greeted him with a cheer, as he came safe to shore. The look with which alone he responded, seemed, however, to chill their enthusiasm, for the cry dropped almost as soon as it was raised.

The band of sharpshooters cheered also, and rode quickly away, having failed of their object.

“Take me to the King,” said the man in black, addressing the officer in command, who now came hurrying down from the Castle—“at once,” he added, as he saw the disposition of the people to try and help him

in their own way. Dishevelled and dripping as he was, there was that about him which made them yield instantly. They followed him, at a respectful distance.

"Essen!" Gustav exclaimed, as if he could scarcely believe the evidence of his senses. "You here, Baron Essen!"

"My King's life is in danger. Where else should I be?"

"My life was in danger some weeks ago; you did not obey my summons." Gustav spoke rapidly and severely. A man who is accustomed to use theatrical effect himself, is, of all others, the least likely to be impressed by it. The pale, exhausted features, the wet, muddy, disordered garments, making little pools on the floor, prejudiced him rather unfavourably than otherwise, though his astonishment had got the better of him in the first instance. Essen was quite prepared for this. But the people had seen him; the courtiers had seen him too. He maintained a dignified silence.

"I presume that you have not come for nothing," said Gustav.

"I have not come to be spoken to as if I were one of your Majesty's lacqueys," said the Baron.

The King was habitually courteous. Nothing but prolonged nervous tension could have made him rude. He was quick to see the error and to repair it.

"Forgive me, Essen!" he said, taking the other's hand. "I am harassed on every side. I am done to

death. I thought that my old friend had become one of my new enemies."

"I am no man's enemy but my own, sire—and, it may be, the King of Denmark's."

"You bring me news from that camp?" said Gustav.

"News of the last importance."

"Indeed?" said Gustav, with the air of a man who is pleased certainly, though all too well accustomed to the rapid turning of Fortune's wheel to show any surprise. "We will hear it as soon as may be. But you say well, that you are your own enemy; you seem to have been doing your best to drown yourself, my dear Baron. We are not in Italy, now, you and I. We cannot face damp and cold with impunity. You must change your wet clothes first, and have some refreshment. My valet will attend on you. Return to me here, when you have all you need."

He said the words lightly, without apparent effort; yet it was one of the hardest things he had ever done in his life, to let Essen go at that moment.

It was not only solicitude for the welfare of an important messenger which compelled him to do so; he felt it needful on his own account. Once already his temper had given way; he could not afford to let it give way again. He sat stiff and upright in his chair, scarcely moving a muscle, for half an hour, conscious that if he only allowed himself to rise, the tempest in

him would break out into something like madness. Essen's desertion had been a heavy blow to him, and he had suffered more than he showed at the time. He liked the man and trusted him; they had travelled in Italy together, when Gustav was at the zenith of his fame, and something of the happiness of that delightful time had been due to him. Was it possible that he had been misrepresented—that he was really faithful? No. His long, unexplained absence confirmed Ribbing's accusation only too well. If Essen had returned at this moment, it was not to die with the King; it was because the tide had turned, and was now running in Gustav's favour. It must be running strongly too; else he would not have dared to come. But how? Why? Rigidly controlling all emotion, Gustav went over every possible combination of events, every possible move wherewith to meet such a combination. By the time Essen reappeared, he was master of himself. No one, looking at the two men, would have supposed that they were about to engage in anything but the most ordinary conversation. The room in which they sat was a fitting scene for such an interview. It was hung with pictures of kings and courtiers—each face a mask.

“With your Majesty's permission,” said the Baron, “I will state at once that I have come straight from the Danish camp, where I believed that I could serve your interests better than in your own. I have lurked about it in disguise for some days. I left it three hours since, having learnt all that I wished to know.”

"Did you discover the hour at which they will attack?" said Gustav eagerly.

"Sire, they will not attack at all. They will not advance beyond Uddevalla. They dare not. The Powers of Europe are against them."

"England?" said Gustav.

"Elliot, the English ambassador, has ridden post-haste across country to threaten a bombardment of Copenhagen by His Majesty George III., if the Danish army is not immediately withdrawn from Gothenburg. He arrived this morning."

"And Prussia?"

"The King of Prussia is prepared to invade Holstein, with a body of sixteen thousand troops, if the Prince of Hesse advances a step farther on Swedish ground."

"France?"

"Louis of France, although debarred from active measures at the present moment, has assured the King of Denmark that he will heartily support the policy of Prussia and of England."

"This is great news indeed," said Gustav, drawing a long breath. "Ewart, the British Minister at Berlin, sent me a courier the day before yesterday, to inform me of the resolution of the Prussian Cabinet. I was uncertain whether to believe it or not. I was right after all when I said that my one chance of safety lay in the Danish invasion. We shall recover the prestige we lost in Russia."

"We have recovered it already, my liege."

"You think so? To what do you attribute this sudden change?"

"To your Majesty's determination to fall with Gothenburg, if Gothenburg fell. It is the second town in the kingdom. The other Powers had no desire to see it in the hands of Denmark; they could not, for very shame, refuse to send help to one who, like your Majesty, was risking his life in defence of the common right of all."

"My life!" said Gustav dreamily, as if it had not struck him before. "My life! Yes, I suppose so. Well, you have saved it, Essen; not for the first time neither."

"I sincerely hope that it may be for the last," said the Baron gravely. "I trust never to see your Majesty in such a desperate strait again. You play bold games, my liege, and Fortune follows your lead; she has justified you this once, but it was bold to the verge of rashness to reckon on the interference of other Powers." He smiled a sinister smile.

"Nor did I reckon on it," said the King. "I reckoned on the love of my subjects."

"May I ask whether they have responded to your expectation?"

"Nobly," rejoined the King, "with a few exceptions—Carl de Geer, for instance—among the nobles."

Essen just perceptibly shrugged his shoulders.

"Your Majesty was unfortunate in the messenger sent to Carl de Geer, if I may venture to say so."

"Say nothing against him; he is dead," said Gustav, in such a matter-of-fact tone that Essen looked up, alarmed. The vibrating melancholy of the King's voice, which had power to draw tears from the eyes of thousands, did not affect him; but this was different.

"Your Majesty is well rid of the youngster."

"If all those of his class loved me as well as that poor boy, I could conquer the world," said Gustav, as though he had not heard or heeded.

"His father made it hard enough for you to conquer Stockholm, sire."

"His father? Ah yes, I had forgotten! He joined my mother's party afterwards, and I lost sight of him." He sat musing, as though the words evoked some painful recollection.

"And it is lucky for you, sire, that you have lost sight of his son. He was a very dangerous young man."

"You too, Essen? Surely you did not believe that rubbish?" said Gustav contemptuously. He was gazing at the fire; he saw one face in it, and that face not a mask like the one opposite.

"I believe what I saw with my own eyes," said Essen, too intent on stating his case to show any surprise at the form of the King's question. "My young Count, not a month ago, descended upon his uncle, Carl de Geer, in the midst of all his guests, one fine evening, and summoned him to the meeting-place at Mora, as if he were a vile peasant of the soil—he, the descendant of those who ruled Gustav Vasa! I heard

him taunt the old lord and his friends because they sympathised with the conspirators of Anjala. I heard him threaten them with the fate of Colonel Hästesko, if they did not obey his commands then and there."

"Well," said the King, bending his brows, "it was foolish, of course—he loved me too well to love me wisely, poor lad!—but, however old Carl de Geer may be now, he was young himself once upon a time—so were you, for the matter of that, Essen—and I see nothing in this grievance to justify his neglect of his sovereign."

"Carl de Geer had another grievance against his nephew, sire."

"What was it?"

"He has a daughter. He might have overlooked his nephew's conduct, but for the discovery that she spent the night with him alone on the hillside."

"What of that?" said the King, almost brutally. "He is dead."

"But she is living, sire. He has no other child."

The King seemed to be weighing the facts in his mind.

"It is absurd to hold anyone responsible for the actions of a mere boy like that," he said at length. "On the other hand, Carl de Geer is too powerful to be his King's enemy. We must bring him round, Essen, we must bring him round. Can anything be done?"

"Sire, it is the great wish of his heart to see his daughter well married."

"Well married?" said the King irritably. "Who is well married? I know of no one. She is beautiful, of course, poor child! There is a law that only daughters should be."

"I dare not pronounce on that point before such a connoisseur as your Majesty."

The King spoke with still greater bitterness. "I am no connoisseur. My Queen was not an only daughter. But we are wandering from the point. Beautiful or un-beautiful, what is to be done with her?"

"I am an old friend of Carl de Geer, as you know, my liege," said the Baron. "I think that I may say I am an old friend of your Majesty's. I am sincerely sorry for the girl. Were I to propose that she should do me"—he hesitated a moment—"the honour of accepting my hand, I believe that I might possibly be of some service both to her father and to the Crown."

The King shook his head. "You are too old for her, Essen. Bah! Why should you wish to marry? Do you want to become the parent of four children, so as to avoid paying the taxes? Have you no other suggestion?"

"Every man for his own hand, your Majesty!" said the Baron, smiling. "If you will give me no assistance, I shall drop my suit, for I cannot succeed without it; but you will hardly expect me to further someone else's. I have known the girl since she was a child."

“Of what assistance can I be to you, Baron? On the one hand, you have a fine estate, I know, but Carl de Geer has a right to expect even more from his son-in-law. On the other hand, I am not possessed of the elixir of youth.”

“Your Majesty is possessed of something very much like it. Money is always young. The Chancellorship of Linköping has just fallen vacant. Give me that post, sire, and I do not fear Carl de Geer. Give me a good word—his daughter is devoted, body and soul, to your Majesty—and I do not fear her. Not now, of course. She will grieve for her cousin a month or so—any woman would; but by-and-by—later on.”

“Poor young Ribbing!” the King said, heaving a sigh. He sat silent for some moments, then rose deliberately and stood with his back to the fire.

“But it is past,” he said. “I do not see what better she can do. It is of the last importance to secure Carl de Geer. You have great influence, I know, Baron. I have felt it myself,”—he smiled,—“but—granted that you had what you asked for—granted that you were in a fit position to sue for his daughter, are you sure that you can bring him back to his allegiance?”

“Sire, I would stake my head upon it.”

“It is well,” said the King. “The patent for the chancellorship shall be made out, and we will pay the old lord a visit on our way back to the capital. Nay, no thanks! It is a bargain, is it not? It pleases you

to be Chancellor of Linköping. It pleases him to marry his daughter. It pleases me that he should be my faithful subject. For our own ends, we are all contributors; I find the money, he the maid, you the fidelity. It is a rule-of-three sum. Have I stated the terms correctly?"

"Your Majesty is exact."

"Enough," said Gustav. "There is a meeting of the Privy Council in the chamber adjoining this in half an hour's time. Till then, farewell!"

Essen was wise enough not to attempt any expression of gratitude. He bowed low and quitted the apartment. The King, who had dismissed him with a careless nod, rose and locked the door after him.

"Five minutes' truce!" he said. "An actor has as much between the scenes of his play."

He threw open the window and drew a deep breath. The Castle stood high. Far down below in the distance he caught sight of a moving figure that reminded him vividly of Adolf Ribbing. His first instinct was to avert his eyes, but he compelled himself to look.

"I am a fool," he said to himself. "Ever since Fersen came to tell me that the cellar had fallen in and crushed him, I see that poor boy everywhere, I hear his voice. And, after all, I am a fool. It was not my doing. We were all deceived. What mattered it, a few hours more or less? No one could have foretold; there was no other choice possible. Wrangel

is rotten to the core, La Gardie loses his head, I dared not risk Fersen."

He covered his eyes with his hand. When he looked again, the figure had disappeared.

"No," he said, returning to practical matters with a sigh of relief, "Fersen must go to Paris. De Staël is but a broken reed. Besides, he has a source of information that is sealed to everyone else."

The King smiled as he thought of it.

"*Le beau jeune homme* disliked my allusion to that last night," he said, knocking the back of his hand against his knee, as his way was, when amused. "Ah, bah! we can make it up to him easily. And as for Carl de Geer's daughter, why, I thank my stars that poor young Ribbing is out of the way, now that Essen has set his heart on her! Oh, but he laid his plans well, the fox! I should have been hard pressed between them, had Ribbing lived. As things are—well! I long ago suspected the Three Water-Lilies. It is worth while to bind Essen to my service—if he can bind Carl de Geer. Eighty thousand a year—and not a man did he send to Mora! It grows serious. The girl will make no difficulty, I suppose."

The King whistled a bar of *Così fan Tutte*, and then fell silent.

"Is it worth while?" he said.

It is but a little step from the worthlessness of woman to the worthlessness of man, and thence to the worthlessness of all things. Weariness and disgust un-

speaking overcame him. What did it mean, this interference of the Powers of Europe? Was it nothing but an imperative call to him to escape from his own release? Was he in truth glad—was he not rather sorry? He took a long look down into the depths of that gulf on the edge of which, until an hour ago, he had supposed himself to be standing.

“And at the bottom of it, there is rest,” he said. “No more false friends—ah, how tired, how sleepy I am!”

He half stifled a yawn, and, leaning back in his chair, let his eyes close. Very haggard and worn he looked. He had not slept the night before. He had lain counting the hours, listening in spite of himself for the report of the explosion which should tell him that the bridge was blown to atoms—that Adolf Ribbing was dead. He had asserted and maintained repeatedly that he could not feel secure till all means of retreat were cut off. In his secret heart he knew that he could never feel secure till one face ceased to haunt him. Before this time, there were long periods when he had forgotten; now, ever since his interview with Fersen, he went on seeing it incessantly. Why, Essen, of all people, had worn that face when first he entered, and every picture on the wall wore it in turn! He was ill, nervous, he told himself. It was only that. He had had nothing to do with the boy's death. Was life so sweet to him? Was it worth while? And even as he asked himself over and over again that dangerous question, to

which all the wealth, the knowledge, the power and glory of this world can give no answer, he felt that it was. He stood upon the heights; he saw the Promised Land at his feet; the haunting face vanished.

“For I begin again to-day, the future clear before me at last—at last!” he said, speaking to himself in the low tones of ecstasy. “There it is, plain and straight. Sweden—my country—first! France next! And then—then”—

He did not finish the sentence. The sun had risen, bright and clear, in a sky of dazzling blue. The mists were all dispersed. The people had got wind of the news of deliverance; from every tower and steeple the bells rang merrily. It was Gustav who had set the bells ringing; for a moment it seemed to him that it was Gustav who had made the sun shine.

Excitement was lighting every face and flashing in every movement of the crowd when he stepped forth from the palace, followed by his suite, to harangue the troops assembled in the great square. Rumours had gone abroad to the effect that the town was saved; how, or by whom, people only conjectured. Nothing was known for certain; his auditors could hardly contain themselves when the King mounted the steps leading to a hastily constructed wooden platform and began to speak. The air he breathed was charged with the inflammable silence of a vast multitude, only restrained from venting its agitation in outcries by the still greater agitation that compelled it to listen.

He spoke briefly, and to the point. The safety of the realm, he said, depended on the success of the efforts of her citizens to save Gothenburg. It was, of course, open to them to surrender at discretion. If they did so, they would probably save themselves much suffering,—he could not and would not disguise from them the horrors of war,—but it would be at the expense of their country, prostrate at the feet of her foes.

A solemn murmur arose among the citizens, and their spokesman stepped forward.

“We are ready to suffer anything,” he said. “We are prepared to undergo a bombardment—to see our children slain—our houses laid in ruins—rather than to surrender this town.”

Then, amid breathless silence, the King announced that he had already received overtures from the Danish camp at Uddevalla, thanks, no doubt, to the firm resolve of Gothenburg to fight to the uttermost—to the powerful reinforcements that were approaching from Dalecarlia—to the intervention of Prussia, of France, and in especial of the very good friend of Sweden, His Britannic Majesty George III., the exertions of whose envoy, Mr. Hugh Elliot, he could not sufficiently commend. For the present, *as soon as the enemy became aware of his movements*—no sooner—he meant to demand a truce of eight days, to be signed on both sides; it was possible that the negotiations during that time would greatly modify the course of hostilities. If not, they were prepared for the worst that could happen. Taking Baron Essen by the

hand, he presented to them the hero who had come through fire and flood to bring them news of the enemy. He it was to whose timely information they owed so much. The only spot that tarnished the gladness of this day, he continued, was his deep regret for the lamented death of one of the bravest of his captains, young Count Ribbing, who had perished in the act of destroying the New Bridge. His body had not yet been recovered from the ruins of the shattered vault, under which there was, alas, no doubt that it lay buried! Further research would, in all probability, bring it to light, enabling them to pay the last sad honours to one who had given his life for that of Gothenburg.

The King paused impressively. Adolf Ribbing was well known among the men, and had made himself universally popular. One or two of them wept aloud. Fersen, who was standing on Gustav's right, bent his head.

Suddenly there was a cry, and the ranks opened.

A slight, boyish figure made its way through them, climbed the few steps up to the platform, and dropped on one knee before the King.

The features were pale, the brown eyes dimmed and sunk. They sought Axel's face, but Axel had covered it with his hands.

Only Baron Wrangel saw the instantaneous recoil of the King, and noted his change of colour.

The next moment all the world saw him come forward, raise the young soldier, and lead him to the front

of the platform, crying, as he placed one hand in his and one in that of Baron Essen, "Behold our two deliverers!"

The Baron darted a look of intense hatred at Adolf, who had no strength to return it, although, confusedly, he heard its language above the thundering shout of all the troops assembled: "Long live Count Ribbing! Long live our three deliverers!"

CHAPTER XX.

A TOKEN.

THE scene in the great square was followed by a solemn thanksgiving service in the cathedral. On the ears of some of those who were present the words of the Te Deum fell with a different signification from that which they had borne the night before.

By the time it was over Adolf had such a violent headache that he was conscious of little except the bounding and thumping of millions of small hammers inside his skull. Everything seemed to be unreal. The fifteen hundred voices chanting round him were mere noise compared with the stern music of those five, breaking the stillness of the dark relentlessly, as human action breaks and disperses the silent, imminent gloom of death, into which, but a moment after, it must resolve. He only desired speech; emotion, urged beyond a certain point, becomes apathy, and it leaves a flatness which nothing except fresh air, or sleep, or friendly intercourse can relieve. His long, slim legs almost gave way beneath him as he came staggering out of the porch.

"Come to my tower," said Axel affectionately, lay-

ing a hand on his shoulder. "You cannot rest at the Castle; they are making hell's own din there. Come and lie down for an hour or so; you will never be able to appear at the banquet to-night unless you do. What? You did not understand that the King had invited you? *Ma foi!* you must be very deaf, my friend."

"I do not know what is the matter with me. I can neither hear nor see. You look as if you had eyes all round your head."

"Come and lie down at once."

Adolf vowed that he could not sleep. He was feverishly excited and inclined to talk. On the other hand, Axel had never been more silent. At first he answered only in monosyllables. At last, finding that even the shortest of these failed to act as a full stop, he said he had an engagement at the Arsenal. Adolf cursed that building audibly. Bad language was of no avail where good proved impotent. His friend departed.

He had fastened the shutters to keep out the brilliant midday light, but it came streaming through the chinks in long, slant rays, filled with the drowsy dance of motes, barring the floor with faint gold. The shouting in the streets had ceased; for a brief period there was no noise. A kind of holiday stillness brooded over the great town; not even a murmur penetrated so far. A delicious feathery warmth settled down upon Adolf; the elfin hammers bumped and thumped less persistently. His eyelids closed and closed again, and every time the

interval between their closing grew less until at length he fell asleep.

Hours afterwards he awoke, with the startled feeling that somebody was looking at him; but there was no one in the room.

The door stood slightly ajar. A chair had been drawn close to the bedside, and on it a little leather pocket-book was lying open. It was the daintiest thing on which his eyes had rested for a long time, bound in the pale, pearly blue of the first forget-me-nots, with a clasp of wrought gold and enamel. The writing on the page could not be Fersen's. It was round and loose, and so large and easy to decipher that Adolf had read the following verses before he knew what he was about:—

“Qu'écrirez-vous sur ces tablettes?
Quels secrets leur confierez-vous?
Ah! sans doute elles furent faites
Pour les souvenirs les plus doux!

En attendant qu'à cet usage
Le souvenir soit employé,
Qu'il soit permis à l'amitié
D'en remplir la première page.”

Underneath Axel had added the single word, *Trianon*.

The second page, immediately below, was blank, except for an entry which must have been made a minute or two before, for the ink was still wet: *4th October 1788.—My friend, Adolf, Count Ribbing, escaped death.*

Adolf lay smiling and thinking until he heard Axel's

step in the passage, when he turned over on his side and pretended that he was yet asleep. His friend shut the door in a cautious manner so as to make no noise, took up the pocket-book, touched the words lightly with his finger to make sure that the ink had dried, fastened the gold clasp, and put it in his breast-pocket. The sun was sinking low by this time, and he moved over to the window to unbar the shutter.

"Your poetical friend has good taste in pocket-books, Axel," said Ribbing, from the bed. "Besides, the verse is charming. I would not exchange friendship for love, if I were you."

At first he doubted whether Fersen heard; next he felt sure that Fersen had, and wished he had not. The silence became uncomfortable. The room was quite light now. If he would only turn round! But Axel remained standing by the window, and a man's back is eloquent of nothing, even to his most intimate friend.

"Forgive me, Axel," he said at last.

Axel came quickly over to the bedside, took Ribbing's hand in his, and looked him full in the face. Now Ribbing felt that the owner of the blue pocket-book should have blushed; he was angry to find that his own cheeks glowed instead, that he had hard work to sustain the unflinching scrutiny. He tried to smile, but could not.

"Ah, you are awake!" said Axel. "You have been dreaming hard. You were dreaming when I came in."

But we will not speak of our dreams?" The tone in which the last words were spoken, half a command, half passionate entreaty, was irresistible.

"I will never speak of mine—to anyone," said Adolf. "What a strange fellow you are! You take nothing seriously except what others would take lightly. But one loves one's friends for what they are and for what they are not; it's no matter."

"I do not follow you."

Ribbing laughed.

"I love you, in the first place, philosopher, because you are Axel Fersen, and in the second, because you are not Adolf Ribbing. That is all. Now tell me, had the King a dream, or why did he think I was dead? Above all, why did you think so? People are curiously ready to believe that I have gone to a better world, though I am still quite content to honour the old one with my presence."

"It happened in this way," said Axel. "The King sent me down to that house as soon as we had heard the report of the explosion. I found that the roof of the cellar had fallen in. The mass of masonry was so compact that three men could not move it so much as a finger's breadth. Naturally, I concluded that you were lying, crushed to atoms, underneath it; and why you are not, I fail to understand."

"Then it was not you who pulled me out?"

"I? I could as soon have pulled out the foundation-stone of the Castle."

"I thought it must have been you," said Adolf, with a puzzled look. "Who was it then, I wonder? Someone must have dragged me into the next house. The explosion stunned me, I suppose. When I came to myself I was lying alone in a room that I did not know. The chiming of the bells woke me up. I wanted to know what had become of the King."

"Did you get out easily?"

"Yes. The doors were not locked though the house seemed to be empty."

"There are empty houses on both sides," said Fersen. "I took care to ascertain that when I began operations. I cannot understand how I could have overlooked a secret passage in the wall. I examined the whole place most carefully. As for the man, you must have imagined him, Adolf. No one knew where you were except Wrangel and La Gardie, and they were both on duty at the palace."

Adolf turned up his coat sleeve and showed Fersen a violet mark high up on the arm.

"Did I imagine that?" said he.

It was growing late, and they had no time to discuss the rescue further. The King had told Adolf that he would speak with him privately before the State banquet.

CHAPTER XXI.

BEFORE AND AFTER.

As Gustav sat alone in the early close of that autumn afternoon, his mind, released for a moment from the strain and tension of the present, went back to his childhood—perhaps because he saw in it a strange, picturesque allegory of his later years.

The day had been a day of violent changes, and his own calmness of demeanour was, after all, little more than apparent. The set resolve with which he rose, armed to face the probability that the last act of the drama was beginning—the feverish, triumphant exaltation of noon—both moods had vanished. The failing light disposed him to melancholy. The high spirit which, throughout his life, answered the call of danger as a bird answers the dawn, flagged and fell drooping in silence.

He smiled with infinite sadness, as he recollected the first scenes: his gay, careless father, a Jack-of-all-trades, if ever there was one; the scornful words, the yet more scornful looks of his beautiful mother.

“I too love to play many games. I too, in my heart of hearts, disdain those who play at them with

greater seriousness than myself. I am my own father—my own mother—and the father and mother of this great people!”

He saw himself, a little eager boy, cutting his fingers with the sharp tools in his father's workshop at Drottningholm.

“And I have cut my fingers, playing with edged tools, many a time since then!” he said, thinking of his fierce nobles.

He saw himself quarrelling with the unfortunate black child, who had been sent as a present to Louisa Ulrica, that she might make the experiment of bringing him up *à la Rousseau*, with no education whatever. The heir-apparent, who, in his own opinion and perhaps in that of some others, had only too much, wished often enough in those days that she had selected her eldest born for this delightful essay.

“But I have quarrelled with many a black child since,” he said, “and ignorance loves me no more now than it did then. What work I had to destroy the Chamber of Roses!”*

He laughed aloud, as he thought of the description of himself which he had recently unearthed in a document bearing the signature of one of his tutors. “The Crown Prince is very stupid about writing, spelling, and grammar. He knows almost nothing of geography; he has an invincible horror of work. Far removed alike

* The torture chamber.

from serious thought and from religious sentiment, his heart is as empty as his intellect."

"Poor old Scheffer!" he said, speaking as though to someone else. "I must have played him many a trick before he wrote that of me. He lived to change his mind. We were good friends afterwards. He attributed my reformation to his own counsels, I suppose. But I owe him a greater debt of gratitude for his bad opinion. I should never have got the upper hand of my troublesome States, if they had not taken his word for it that I 'knew almost nothing of geography.' They might have been warned in time. I was only seventeen, when Voltaire wept—or said he wept—because someone told him that I had learnt the *Henriade* by heart. They did not know that I was fond of Descartes, even then; *Cogito, ergo sum*. They did not think, but they existed all the same, the more's the pity."

His lips grew bitter as he thought of the one event of his life in which the nobles had been too strong for him—his marriage with the plain, dull, bigoted daughter of Denmark. Yet even the tragedies of youth have some little refreshing touch of youth's follies upon them. The diamond buttons, brought by special courier from Paris, as if they had been the most important despatch, that his costume might exactly resemble that of the Dauphin, pleased him now, as they had pleased him then—for a different reason.

They made him think of France. How he had plotted and schemed to get there; how he had rejoiced

in his escape from bondage and revelled in the freedom of his inferiors! And what a pleasant place was Paris for the young Count de Haga, as he styled himself in those days! The King of Sweden laughed at the mere recollection. He had a smile for "the Dubarry" even, and the jewelled necklace he had given her little dog, and the disgust and contempt of the lovely Dauphiness, when she heard of his prudent behaviour. Marie Antoinette had not learned prudence then.

How many fair women there were in the world, twenty years since—how many witty and wise men! What had become of them all? Hard question! Some, like himself, had left their youth so far behind that it seemed like a nursery tale; and some were dead. He thought of these with tender, yearning regret. The tears stood in his eyes, as the vision of his Egeria, beautiful Madame d'Egmont, stood clear and sweet before him, clothed in the three soft colours, lilac, silver, and green, that he continued to wear long afterwards, for love of her. Thus was she dressed when she sat beside him in the box at the opera, on the night when he opened the despatch containing the news of his father's sudden death. He saw her delicate face and large, spiritual eyes; he heard her musical whisper, "*Contentez-vous, sire, d'être absolu par la séduction, ne le réclamez jamais comme un droit.*"

"It was soon after that I signed the Constitution of 1720," he said, and his mouth grew stern again. "Someone who was looking on told me that I did it with a

smile, *qui disait bien des choses*. I have signed other documents since with something that was not a smile. Old Fritz too! He thought his little nephew would be easy game. How his wrinkled brows drew together when I promised him that I would rule Sweden 'wisely and worthily,' and nothing more! Upon my soul, I was as glad to get out of the room as if I had been a beaten army! But afterwards—ah, that was the grand time! 'The Ides of March,' and all the rest of it. The wish was father to the thought in that case. Spite of his veneration for the classics, I think he could have found it in his heart to reverse the parts of the older and the younger man, and play Brutus to my Cæsar. He and the Empress Catharine reckoned without their host for once. Her Imperial Majesty will make a wry face when she hears of this day's work. How pleased she was long ago when I sent her word that I was about to ask leave of the Senate to travel! Travelling! why, it would have paid the Empress Catharine to pay my travelling expenses for the rest of my natural existence. Well, *Rira bien qui rira le dernier*. Who knows what the future may hold in store?"

Gustav's expression darkened. The past had been his friend. At times it seemed to him that his only real enemy was that future of which he and his foes were alike ignorant. His meditations became abstract as he sat leaning his head on his hand.

"Has the Divine Being who gave us memory to torture and to delight us given us indeed nothing

whereby we may know the foretaste as well as the aftertaste, nothing whereby we may make the future our own? Has He given us eyes at the back of our intellect, and none whereby we may look forward? Believe it who list, that will not I! Some art there is, some way by which to see. The eyes are there. They make a great mistake who say such knowledge as that causes fear; if we could but be sure of it, we never should fear anything. The veriest coward on earth can face the inevitable. It is only the uncertain that we dread—and the bravest of us dreads that.”

Here Gustav fell into a depth of thought which no words could represent. Gifted beyond many men of his age with clear, practical views, he had never cared to pry into the future from motives of morbid curiosity—from a feeling that it was wicked, and therefore agreeable, to force the secrets of his Creator. He was honestly annoyed by the one unknown quantity which might, at any moment, alter the terms of the equation that he was working out. He honestly believed that science, which was doing so much to annihilate space already, would, in the end, annihilate time also—that it was but a question of finding the right way. He had been present at solemn discussions of the theory that any man had but to mount high enough in a balloon, to descend in any country that he preferred, just at the moment when the earth’s revolution brought it directly underneath him. Why might not the daring aeronauts of the spirit world mount above life, and see

its every phase mapped out before them, descending at will upon the past, the present, or the future? Meantime, he kept his mind open; nor was he easily credulous. When he first visited Paris, a clairvoyante had told him to beware of firearms in the year 1792. Her prediction was not so implicitly believed but that he thought it needful to write a long letter, on the eve of the *coup d'état* of 1772, full of instructions to his brother as to the course to be pursued, in the event of his death while it was still in progress. Now, sounding his own conscience, he asked himself whether the recent warning of Noorna Arfridson had found him more susceptible; he answered that it had not. As for the momentary impulse to shrink back when he saw Adolf Ribbing again, that was mere surprise—overwrought nerves—what you will!

And yet an unacknowledged feeling that he was ashamed of the movement and would have recalled it if he could, drove him on to make much of Ribbing. He pondered long over the means of doing so. His memory was tenacious; when he recalled the conversation at Mora, he had little doubt as to the request most likely to be preferred in the forthcoming interview. He wanted to convince himself that his attitude to this young man was just what it would have been to any other—if anything, even more generous and affectionate. How was it possible to do this, when the reward that would certainly be claimed was no less certainly promised to someone else?

“What if I were to break with Essen?” he said to himself. “Can I afford it? He is hand and glove with the nobles. He does not care for Carl de Geer’s daughter, and my young Mercury does. Either way, I bind Carl de Geer to my cause; he has no other heir. And Mercury thinks me a god, whereas Essen knows me to be a man. True, Essen is a far more influential person. He thinks himself neglected too. I could see that in his manner. Neglected men are dangerous.”

He summoned up a vision of Essen’s sombre and brooding countenance, and turned from it with relief to Ribbing’s boyish face. Yes—with relief—he was himself once more! Why not insist that Essen should give up his suit before he assumed the Chancellorship of Linköping? Why not throw the weight of his influence into the scale and persuade Carl de Geer to accept Ribbing as his son-in-law? He had not thoroughly liked Essen’s plan from the first. It concentrated too much power in the hands of one. Yet how persuade him to abandon it?

“Well,” he said to himself, with a smile, “are there no other feminine investments? It must be delicately done, but why should not I do it? By Heaven, I will! I sent young Ribbing to Mora. That was a dangerous task enough, and he came safely through. I sent him to Gothenburg: it was said that no one could reach Duretz—he reached him. It was Ribbing that I ordered to blow up the bridge. Any other man would have died; he escaped. If it be true that I behold Death in

person when I see him, he bears a charmed existence until he has accomplished the purpose for which he was born. I wished to put it to the test; I have done so. Who is that? Ah, Wrangel!"

"A letter for your Majesty, forwarded by the Ambassador of France, *viâ* Copenhagen," said the Baron, as he presented it.

The King glanced at the neat, clear writing.

"Ah, Madame de Staël! That can wait," he said, with a half-sigh for his youth. Time was when a letter from Paris—an ill-spelt letter, full of long lectures on government and the morality of politics—would make him put aside important business for the laborious pleasure of deciphering it. On the very day of his coronation, he had answered one of these epistles with another, twelve pages long. But Madame d'Egmont was gone, and all the *bons mots* of the future Corinne could not make up for her.

"An audience is demanded, your Majesty. I heard Count Ribbing inquire when you would be at leisure."

Something insolent in the Baron's tone struck Gustav. He had noticed it on the preceding night, and set it down to jealousy.

"Let Count Ribbing wait!" he said. "Everything comes to him who waits—at least they say so in France. Be seated, my dear Baron! I want to ask your advice."

"Your Majesty does me too great honour."

Gustav crossed one leg over the other, and leaned

back carelessly in his chair. To ask advice of any man is, as he well knew, the best means of flattering him. Wrangel would say, of course, that the appointment ought to be given to Adolf's rival. The King would demur at first—would then appear to be convinced.

"You are aware that Baron Essen and Count Ribbing have both rendered important services to the State?" he said.

"I have ears, your Majesty, and my sight is as good as ever it was, thank Heaven!"

The King was apt to confound impertinence with independence. Wrangel knew this, and made the most of it.

"The Chancellorship of Linköping is vacant," continued Gustav. "Baron Essen, I know, desires it. I have good reason to think that Count Ribbing will apply for it also. I cannot cut it in two, like Solomon's baby. With the best will in the world—for I should be the last to contest the justice of the claim on both sides—I cannot give it to both. To which of the two, then, shall I give it?"

"Sire, the Count Ribbing," said the Baron, without a moment's hesitation.

"Why?" asked Gustav, with as much indifference as he could throw into a question that he had not expected to ask. Wrangel's answer took him by surprise.

The Baron shrugged his shoulders.

"I have heard it said, your Majesty, that there are

two ways of getting rid of a dangerous person: you must conciliate him or you must kill him. The last is the safest, but it is also the most difficult. It is not only cats that have nine lives."

"To what do you allude?" said the King. "So far as I can see, we were not speaking of dangerous persons at all. If circumstances were to make either of these two men my enemy—which Heaven forefend!—Ribbing is younger, he has but a few barren acres; Essen has great experience, and his estates are larger. You made a slight mistake, did you not? It is Essen that you meant to recommend me not to offend?"

"It is Essen, sire, if it was of Essen that Noorna Arfridson foretold a certain event."

"You have heard that foolish story?" said the King, laughing—he always laughed when he heard it mentioned. "Who told it you?"

"Ribbing himself. It seemed to amuse him even more than it amuses your Majesty."

"Indeed? I understand now that you should think him a person to be conciliated. Yet it may well be that he was amused," said the King. "I do not think I have a more faithful servant—in a good hour be it spoken!"

"It is to his interest, sire, to make a great show of fidelity. I do not blame it. I should do the same, were I in his place."

"Would you?" said the King drily.

"More especially," Wrangel went on, as though he

had not heard the question, "if my father had been, like his, your Majesty's determined opponent."

"True. He was my mother's friend—that is as much as to say, her son's bitterest foe. I have been reminded of that once already."

Gustav sighed. Any allusion to his mother saddened him; she was the evil genius of his life.

"If your Majesty does not give Count Ribbing the Chancellorship of Linköping, your Majesty will no doubt bestow on him something of equal value."

"There is no other post vacant at this moment."

"Sire, there is always a rich marriage to be made."

"Did Count Ribbing hint at any such thing?" said Gustav, pausing.

"It is an open secret that he admires one of the beauties of Sweden, your Majesty. Fame says that his cousin has hair of the Venetian hue. Hair of that colour weighs very heavy—it might perhaps be found to weigh even heavier than the chancellorship. It *might*; I do not say that it would."

"Count Ribbing must manage his love affairs for himself," the King said lightly. "I will think over your advice, my dear Baron, but I cannot say that I am altogether prepared to take it. He deserves some reward, no doubt. But if we give him everything at once, we shall deprive ourselves of the pleasure of rewarding him over and over again."

"Everyone will agree that it is prudent in your

Majesty to give Count Ribbing whatever reward he may ask for," said Wrangel doggedly.

"I have not always done what everybody would agree was most prudent. But I will give the matter my best consideration. In the meantime, allow me to thank you for your good counsel. Be so kind as to tell Count Ribbing that I am at his service. He has not the *grandes entrées*, as you have. Do you recommend that I should give him those also?"

"A superfluous question, sire! If I know our friend, he will take them without asking."

At that moment Adolf's voice was heard outside in the passage.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE PROMISE.

"BE seated, my dear Count," said Gustav amiably, as his lacquey lighted the candles. "I must ask your indulgence while I finish a despatch for the next mail. I shall be at your service immediately," and he drove a spluttering quill across the blank sheet of paper before him.

Had Adolf looked over his shoulder, he would have been surprised to see that the King was writing his own name again and again, with great regularity and swiftness. Meditations like those which Wrangel had interrupted were not usual with him; he resembled a woman, in that his thoughts moved more easily when his hands moved.

"So that is the reason of the rogue's disdainful manners to his sovereign! He thinks me afraid. There is no reason why he should not make others think so too. He is clever enough, in his own way. He would never have advised me as he did, had he not thought that I wished it. If I give this boy here his heart's desire—if I hopelessly alienate Essen, who is, as Wrangel is well aware, a much more important person

—his conjecture will be turned into certainty. Dare I risk that?"

It was a curious dilemma. Afraid of his own fear, he had made up his mind to defy it; and the very action by which he meant to defy it, would, so it seemed, be construed into fear by everyone else. He made a long pause and dropped the pen. Adolf wondered into what foreign country those vague blue eyes were gazing; when not directly fixed, their empty distance of expression was almost vacant.

"No." He took up the pen again. "The bargain must stand as it is, for the present, at anyrate. But what to do with Ribbing?"

His eye fell by chance on the unopened letter beside him. It brought back with a rush the old delightful recollections.

"The very thing!" he said to himself. "I will send him to Paris with Axel Fersen. They are great friends; there is no hardship in that. Hardship? Ah, would that I could go myself! I will tell *Madame l'Ambassadrice* to give him a taste of the life there. If he does not fall in love with her, a thousand chances to one that he does with somebody else; and then I am quit of this coil. Anyhow, it will gain time."

The blue eyes veered round and flashed on Adolf once more.

"I hope that you are quite recovered?"

Once more it was hard to him to speak in the King's presence. Since the journey to Mora, he had felt a

dumb, dog-like happiness in being near his master, which only strong excitement, like that of the night before, could melt into ease.

"We will not beat about the bush," said the King. "Life is short—we have all heard that from our babyhood—and the fact that it seems a little longer to-night than it did either to you, Count, or to me this morning, does not authorise us to delay. You have deserved well of the Crown. What do you want?"

"I want my cousin, sire," said Adolf, smiling. He was not prepared for such an abrupt question, and the suddenness of it left no time for diplomacy.

"I thought as much," said the King, shaking his head. "How old are you?"

"Nineteen, sire."

"Nineteen—and he wants his cousin!" The King lifted up his hands in despair. "And does your cousin want you, may I ask? Oh, very well; your cheeks have answered for you! And does her father want you also?"

"If he did, sire, I should not have troubled your Majesty."

"It is a delicate business," the King said, drumming with his fingers on the table. "You are aware—indeed, you told me yourself—that Carl de Geer is but a lukewarm friend of mine. I must ask you for your full confidence. Is there any sort of secret understanding between you and the lady?"

"We were betrothed as children. My uncle broke

off the formal engagement, but my cousin and I have never ceased to consider ourselves bound by it."

"He countenanced the betrothal at the time?"

"Yes."

"On what ground did he afterwards refuse his consent?"

"We are not of the same way of thinking in religion and politics, your Majesty."

"Ah! when was nineteen ever of the same way of thinking in religion and politics as nineteen multiplied by three? But the old can never understand that the young are not old, nor the young that age is nothing but the absence of youth."

"I am willing to make every allowance for the prejudices of an old man," said Adolf stiffly; "but your Majesty would not wish me to give up my convictions."

"Certainly not," said Gustav, raising his eyebrows with an assumption of solemnity which, to anyone rather more experienced than the Count, might have implied, "They will give you up of their own accord soon enough, my dear boy."

The conversation seemed to come to a full stop. Adolf wondered why.

"You must allow me time," Gustav resumed, in a different tone. "Will you confide in me altogether? Will you trust your King to do the best that he can for you?"

"Your Majesty is too good," said Adolf, and in a moment his hope grew into faith.

"Remember that he is twice as old as you are," the King said, smiling, as a brother might, while he rose and laid his hand lightly on Adolf's shoulder, "twice as near death—*the last folly we can commit*, as a clever lady once called it—twice therefore, twice as foolish. Do you think you can trust him?"

Adolf raised the hand that fell on his and kissed it fervently.

"Is it a covenant between us? Well, then, promise me three things! First, that you will not tell anyone what has passed at this interview."

Adolf promised gladly.

"In the second place, that you will start for Paris with Count Fersen as soon as our affairs here are wound up, and that you will not attempt to come back to this country till I recall you."

Adolf glanced up, as if he thought that his ears must have deceived him and his eyes could report differently; but the King kept the same benevolent smile. It was exile where he had looked for home. Still, the King must know best. He mastered a rebellious feeling of disappointment as well as he could, and promised.

"Thirdly, that you will not attempt to see your cousin before you go, nor to hold any communication with her before your return."

As suddenly as hope had grown surprise fell to

despair. Every trace of colour left the young man's cheek.

"I cannot promise that," he said.

"I am quite aware that the condition is a hard one"—the King's voice was almost womanly in softness. "Nothing short of necessity would make me impose it upon you. It is to save you from a condition harder still. You think now—you cannot help thinking—that you desire nothing in the world so much as to see your cousin before you go?"

Adolf blushed to find himself discovered. Was it so common then, this deep emotion of his? Was it so silly? He would not speak till he had his voice under control.

"I am not such a fool, your Majesty. If I could see that our meeting now would make it less easy for us to meet hereafter, I would give it up."

"I will explain my meaning. I suppose that you have, from time to time, corresponded with your cousin?"

Adolf assented.

"And this correspondence has been kept secret from Carl de Geer? I thought so. He will be sure to find it out. Believe me! I have had as much to do with secret correspondence as any man."

"We would not continue it," said Adolf eagerly.

"You think not? Your cousin, if you see her, will soon change that opinion. You shake your head. You believe that she is one in a thousand. There is no

such thing, my dear Count. One woman is another woman. I know them. We are wax in their hands; and they love to write letters—above all, to write letters in secret. If she sees you, she will know whither you are going. If she knows whither you are going, nothing will serve her but she must write. If, at the very moment when I am making overtures to Carl de Geer, he finds that he is being deceived by those of his own house, he will not give you his daughter, nor could I, in such a case, bring pressure to bear upon him.”

“I could explain to Tala”—

The King shrugged his shoulders.

“If you see her, I can do nothing for you. I fully believe in the honesty of your purpose; but there is no such thing as a dual control. The greatest king on earth has no power where a woman steps in; and the humblest woman on earth thinks she knows better than the wisest man—were that man Socrates. If you see her, you will be her servant, not mine. You would begin by obeying my instructions, you would end by obeying hers. Make your choice. Manage your affairs your own way, if you will. You know best whether you have any chance of succeeding. But if you entrust them to me, I must have a free hand. I must be able to assure Carl de Geer that you have behaved in the most upright and honourable manner—that you have never, to my certain knowledge, deceived him. There must be no saving clause, remember, no private under-

standing. You must promise, and you must keep your word."

"Will your Majesty allow me to pay one visit—to write one letter to my cousin, before I go?" said Adolf. "How can she understand else? She will think that I have deserted her."

"Impossible! That one visit—that one letter would compromise everything. It is not that I do not see your difficulty, Count; but I intend to visit Carl de Geer on my way home from this place. I will myself explain your silence—your absence—to the lady. Does this satisfy you?"

Still Adolf hesitated.

"It is not likely that you will be away for more than a year, at the farthest. She must be very inconstant if she cannot wait so long for the chance of her life's happiness."

Still not a word.

The King frowned.

"Well, take your own way," he said, with a smile that hurt his devoted follower even more. "You may be right. I am but a broken reed to lean upon. My life itself is threatened every moment. Why should I expect, even of those who love me best, that they should believe in any power of mine to help them?"

"I promise," said Adolf desperately. His head was swimming.

"You do well," said the King, after a moment's pause. "There is one question more that I must ask

you. The answer that you give I will not divulge to anyone; it is a mere form. But there are reasons why I must be convinced that I have heard the truth from your own lips. The line of conduct that I pursue towards the father may depend upon it. Have you ever—wittingly or unwittingly—done anything which might be held in any way to compromise the lady's reputation?"

The question, from anyone else, would have kindled Adolf's wrath; but it was asked in such a way that he could not feel offended.

"Never!" he answered solemnly. It did not occur to him to think of the night on the hillside, for he was quite unconscious that Tala had been seen, and, even had he known it, knowing as he did his own innocence and hers, it would not have troubled him.

A curious gleam shone in the blue eyes of the King. It was open to him to believe Essen or to believe Ribbing. He did not see that it was open. Bitter experience had convinced him that what sounded bad might be untrue, but that what sounded good must be. For the first time, Adolf, as he thought, had told him a lie. He was not at all sorry.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE ARABIAN NIGHTS.

THINGS went merrily in Gothenburg from that day forward. A wonderful change had taken place. Was it the same city? Adolf asked himself. Where were the shadowy creatures who could not be roused to take even those measures which were most needful for their own preservation? Where were those thin, starved wretches, who slid like ghosts about the streets? They were full of laughter now, echoing with jovial shouts and cries of enthusiasm. Those who had formerly refused all assistance were now eager to do everything in their power. The courage of one man had routed the cowardice of thousands, and the King was the life and soul of the defence. No one stirred without his knowledge; every detail was submitted to him, each difficulty reported the moment it arose. The fortifications were made secure. The artillery was repaired. Special directions were given with regard to the cannon, many pieces of which were choked with dust, and quite unfit for use, owing to the want of gun-carriages. The East India merchantmen gave up their own splendid horses for the service. The local militia was called out, and

twelve hundred volunteers were enrolled from among the citizens alone.

The Dragoons and the Life Guards were among the first to arrive from without. They entered slowly, for, since the destruction of the New Bridge, there was no means of reaching the city except by boat or by the drawbridge. Day by day the advance companies of the Dalecarlians came pouring in, to the wild sound of horns and the blare of other uncouth instruments, that jarred upon the ear as strangely as their rough dialect. They would be terrible foes; there was no doubt of that. Adolf, as he looked on, wondered whether they would be amenable to any control whatever—even to that of Armfelt, their adored captain. He had but little time to think of his own affairs—had indeed almost forgotten them in the absorbing interest of the present.

One morning as he sat in the anteroom, busy over the plan of a stockade which was to be erected on the north side of the town, a blast of trumpets caused him to look up from his work.

This was not the hour at which the troops were generally paraded; he felt sure that it must portend something unusual, and was about to run downstairs to inquire, when Fersen entered the room hurriedly, with some appearance of excitement.

“News!” he cried. “News! The Prince Marshal of Hesse has sent General Haxthausen, with two trumpeters, to summon Gothenburg to surrender.”

Adolf sprang from his seat, seized the poker as the first thing that came to hand, flourished it round his head, gave a savage war-whoop of triumph, and burst into a fit of uncontrollable laughter, in which for once Fersen joined heartily. When the tempest of mirth had subsided a little, he continued—

“They are on the opposite side. The drawbridge has not yet been let down. Count Sparre has sent to me for instructions. Haxthausen says that he wants to see Duretz.”

“He does not know the King is here then?”

Fersen shook his head.

Again their laughter made the old walls ring.

“But what are we to do?”

“Why, ask the King, of course!”

“I dare not.”

“*Dare not?*”

“I dare not,” repeated Fersen, slightly raising his delicate eyebrows. “His Majesty is reading *The Arabian Nights* for the first time.”

For all his answer Adolf went over to the door leading into the King’s apartment and knocked loudly.

There was no reply.

He opened it, Axel following hard behind to support him.

The King was seated in an arm-chair by the fire resting his head on one hand, while in the other he held an open book.

“Sire!” said Adolf, making no effort to restrain

himself, "Prince Charles of Hesse has sent General Haxthausen to summon the town to surrender."

"Ah, I forgot to lock the door!" said the King, in a regretful tone. "Well?"

"General Haxthausen has asked to see General Duretz, and Count Sparre has sent for instructions. What answer does your Majesty wish returned? Shall we tell him to go about his business?"

"On no account," said the King quickly. He thought a little. "Is he aware that I am here?"

"No, your Majesty."

"Say that the Governor will see him at once. Be careful not to mention my name. Assure him of a safe conduct, but tell him that he must allow himself to be blindfolded before he is led through the ranks. Has he anyone with him, by the way?"

"Two trumpeters, your Majesty."

"Blindfold them also; let my steward give them some refreshment below stairs. Let me see—how much time have we? twenty minutes"—he turned the pages of his book rapidly, to see how many there were to the end—"no—say half an hour! On with your best uniforms, gentlemen!"—he turned to Adolf and Axel—"and request your friends to don theirs likewise! I am going to hold a *levée* in the great hall. I shall expect everyone to be present, in full dress. General Haxthausen will be as much surprised to see us, I think, as the fisherman was to see the genie come out of the sealed bottle. I am much obliged to you, Count Fersen,

—to you also, Count Ribbing,—for your extreme promptitude.”

The two friends withdrew immediately. They heard the key turn in the lock as soon as they had shut the door.

“That is a most wonderful man,” said Fersen.

“Is he a man at all?” said Adolf, laughing again. “He is two at least—sometimes I think he is ten. But this is excellent sport. Go you to the General, and I will tell Wrangel, Clas Horn, La Gardie, and the rest.”

Half an hour afterwards he was at his post in the great hall, talking to the different members of the Court as they came in.

Punctual to the moment, the King entered, leaning on the arm of Baron Essen, and seated himself in the midst of the hall. He was daintily attired in blue and silver, and the sombre velvet which the Baron wore made an excellent foil. For all his hatred of Essen, Adolf could not but remark that he looked very handsome; his coal-black hair and dark features contrasted finely with the curling golden locks and forget-me-not eyes of the royal favourite, Armfelt (“the bonny general,” as the Dalecarlians called him), who stood on the other side. A brilliant group of distinguished officers, amongst whom Axel’s tall, stately figure was conspicuous, formed a half circle behind them. Clas Horn strode in, consciously magnificent in black and flame colour. Young La Gardie’s crimson satin became his boyish face and fair hair.

"A pretty thing that we should all be summoned hither to play at blindman's-buff!" sneered Wrangel, as he passed to his place. He was not so well dressed as the others. Adolf inclined to think that want of cash sometimes led to want of courtesy, and had become more lenient in consequence.

Presently the door was flung open, and the ambassador, who was well known, personally or by name, to most of those present, was introduced.

It was evident that the bandage had only just been taken off, for he advanced a step or two uncertainly, as though the light dazzled his eyes, then stopped, put up his hand as he recognised the King, and fell back with a little cry of dismay.

A low murmur of amusement, which even good manners could not entirely repress, went round the circle.

"Where did you think I was, *mon Général?*" said the King, smiling.

"The Prince of Hesse believed your Majesty to be at Carlstadt," said the bewildered messenger.

"Ah, well, I was there—a week since, I suppose, as the Prince of Hesse reckons. It was there that I had the pleasure of an interview with Mr. Hugh Elliot of the British Legation. He should have reached the Danish camp by now."

"He reached it two days since, your Majesty. He assured the Prince that your Majesty was already at Gothenburg, but—if I may say so—we did not believe him."

“A very amusing man,” remarked the King, “and, as I have the honour to point out to you, sir, a true prophet at the same time. I was never more entertained with anyone’s conversation in my life than I was with his. Now that the aspect of things has changed so much, I will not conceal from you that I was in low spirits at that time. In fact, I went so far as to tell Mr. Elliot that I no longer counted myself a king. ‘Lend me your crown,’ said he, ‘and I will restore it to you with all its lustre.’ The self-confidence of these Englishmen is amazing. But in very truth I begin to think the Danes equal them. Is it possible that the Prince of Hesse really believed that the second city in Sweden would surrender at discretion so soon as he chose to summon it?”

“His Highness has good reason to think that Gothenburg could not long sustain a bombardment,” said the General, nettled by the King’s tone of contempt, and showing greater dignity than he had yet displayed. “He wishes to give her citizens the option of mercy.”

“He is quite at liberty to do so,” said the King, rising and going towards the window. “Call up the trumpeters, La Gardie. There is a balcony here, from which the General may make any proclamation he chooses. The great square is full of my subjects, I perceive. If they elect to listen, let them do so!”

Haxthausen stepped forward with alacrity, and was assisted out of the window by Fersen; but the instant he appeared, such a roar of execration rose up from the

infuriated multitude down below, that he turned back, unable to face it.

"You will not try?" said the King blandly. "Well, perhaps it is wiser not! They are hardly in the mood to make a good audience. That being so, your errand here is, I conceive, at an end. My guards will have great pleasure in escorting you back again; but, as you saw nothing upon your first arrival, I hope you will allow us, first of all, to make what amends we can, by showing you various arrangements, which may be of some interest, before you return. Count Ribbing, will you kindly attend General Haxthausen round the fortifications, and take him over the Arsenal, the Armoury, and the Commissariat Department?"

If the General did not see all that there was to be seen that day, it was by no means the fault of Count Ribbing.

They found the King still in the great hall, on the conclusion of their rounds.

"You have inspected the new earthworks?" he asked.

"I have, your Majesty."

"You understand these things. They are in good order?"

"In excellent order, sire."

"You saw the field-pieces? We have had some little trouble with them. Should you have guessed as much?"

"I should not have guessed it, your Majesty. I am

bound to admit that the defences are in excellent working condition."

"We have seven thousand now in garrison, and are expecting reinforcements," observed the King. "All the non-combatants have been dismissed; that is in itself a source of strength. As regards treasure-trove, the bullion in the Bank was buried in a secret place, known only to myself and two of the leading councillors, the night before last. You may think it strange that I tell you this; but I assure you, we are anxious for the game to begin. General Armfelt informs me that it is all he can do to keep the Dalecarlian regiments from breaking the truce, even now. There is one thing, however, which I fear the modesty of my young captain here"—he smiled at Adolf—"may have neglected to show you," and he pointed to the ruined fragment of an arch, still standing above the river.

"Do you see that?" he said, with stern emphasis. "That is all that is now left of a structure which the Prince of Hesse will find described in his map of Gothenburg as the New Bridge over the Göta. We can scarcely see it from here; you will get a better view on your way through the Swedish lines. The bridge was destroyed by Captain Ribbing, a few days since, at the risk of his own life. It will not now be of much assistance, either to the Prince of Hesse, if he wishes to march his men in, or to me, if I wish to march my men out. It is as impossible for us to fly as for you to surprise us; and the citizens of the town are

unanimous that they will see it razed to the last stone—like that bridge—before they surrender. I wish you a very good-morning, sir! Convey my most distinguished compliments to the Prince Marshal, and say that, whenever he honours us with a visit, we shall do our best to give him a warm reception.”

The General was ushered out of the Castle with great ceremony, and the *levée* broke up, each member of the Court resuming his particular employment.

Adolf lingered behind the rest.

The King drew from his pocket the little volume which he had been studying earlier in the day, and began to read again with avidity. He never used a mark; the book seemed to open of itself at the place where he had left off.

Adolf, who was still excited and rather inclined to talk, smiled to himself at his disappointment, and the King, looking up, caught his eye, and laughed good-humouredly enough.

“My dear young Count,” said he, “you are diverted because I read fairy tales. It is, I own, a singular amusement for a man in my position, but they are the only stuff for times like these, when any attempt to pourtray Nature as she is appears flat beside the reality. I am like the princess who encountered all sorts of adventures with nothing but a smock and a casket of diamonds. My life is a fairy tale more strange than any one of them; if it were written in a book, nobody would believe it.”

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE BEGGAR'S OPERA.

ON the evening of the ninth of October, when it was definitely known that an armistice had been decided upon, an order went forth that the city of Gothenburg should be illuminated. The windows of every house were wreathed in light. Even the poorest people there bought one small candle, if they could not afford more, and set it in the centre and let it burn to the socket. From the balconies of the wealthy ship-owners swung great black cauldrons, filled with leaping flame. Others had fastened torches on either side the door. The High Street and many of the principal thoroughfares were outlined in brilliant rows of twinkling stars; on the topmost tower of the cathedral a huge cross of fire, tip-tilted by the wind, flared skyward, as though it would have soared up far beyond the clouds, and taken rank with Boötes.

The place was full of life and stir, crowded with eager citizens. Many of the fugitives had not gone farther than the neighbouring villages, and at the news that Gothenburg was saved they were all returning. Their friends were flocking to the gates to meet them.

The streets were thronged. Fresh arrivals had become too common to attract any notice whatever. Among them were large numbers of country-folk, eager to hear the latest details. The inns were doing a brisk business, and there was much coming and going, especially at the most popular of all, which bore the emblematic Wheatsheaf of the Vasas, blazoned in flickering gold and crimson over its portal.

A motley crew was gathered in the bar, where, if drinking healths could make men immortal, the life of Gustav would certainly have been secured for ever. The King was everybody's hero. After him, in the estimation of the vulgar—but only a very long way after him—came Baron Essen and young Count Ribbing. The general opinion was that he had given these gentlemen far greater credit than they deserved. It was to him, to him alone, that the safety of the city was due. His wise foresight had controlled everything. He knew that the Danes must and would yield at the last moment. He knew there was no real risk in sending a man to blow up the bridge. Anybody could have done that. The fellow was but too lucky to get the chance. It was the merest superfluous generosity on the King's part to praise him. And at every fresh story and at every fresh instance of the King's prowess or sagacity, an old, white-bearded beggar-man, who sat boozing in one corner, cried out, in tones of tipsy exultation—

“Huzza for the King!”

The last comer was just concluding a sensational

description of the King's ride to Gothenburg, when a young man, dressed in the English fashion, stepped inside, looked round him, and seemed about to withdraw again.

"And that is how the King reached Gothenburg!" the speaker finished up triumphantly.

"Huzza for Adonis!" shouted the old beggar-man up in the corner.

There was a general laugh, under cover of which the seeming Englishman turned back quietly enough, took a seat as far as possible from the beggar, and asked for something to drink. He might have been about twenty. He had a very fair skin, and large, restless grey eyes.

"What did you say *Adonis* for, old Whitehead?" cried a lusty cheesemonger, giving his neighbour a punch in the ribs; but the beggar-man only chuckled foolishly, and the talk went on as before.

The young Englishman contributed not a little to its cheerfulness. England was very popular that evening, on account of the threatened bombardment of Copenhagen, and there was a national disposition to like anyone who hailed from that quarter. Hugh Elliot, the British envoy, who, on the apparent failure of his efforts to negotiate peace with the Danish princes, gave them a spirited warning to the effect that the result of their conduct would be a rupture with England and with Prussia, and repaired immediately to Gothenburg, had been hailed with enthusiasm. The English seamen

then in the harbour had volunteered to help in the defence, and they were therefore on excellent terms with the citizens.

This boy (for he was little more) spoke Swedish fluently, only helping himself out with an occasional foreign word or two. He knew somebody connected with the Court, he said. The stories that he told about the King were even more wonderful than those which had preceded them, and he talked with a grace and fire which took everyone captive—everyone, that is, except the old beggar, who had fallen into a semi-intoxicated sleep, and only grunted now and then at inappropriate places, presumably when the story his own dreams were telling him required comment. He was muttering something about the power of Venus, when the door opened again, and two travelling musicians—one carrying a harp, the other a violin—appeared in the entry.

“Why, he is dreaming about Adonis!” cried the Englishman. “Venus must have been fast asleep herself before she took him for that gentleman. What do you say to it, friends?”

The company, never having heard of Venus in their lives before, otherwise than in the capacity of a vessel, laughed more loudly than ever, for fear of betraying the fact that they did not understand the joke, and the harpist and the fiddler joined cordially enough; but when this burst of merriment was over, one of the men

round the fire, afraid perhaps of further mysteries in the speech of the story-teller, said—

“Come, we have talked long enough! Let's have a turn of the fiddle, eh, comrades?”

“I cannot oblige the company to-night,” said the fiddler, somewhat shortly. “My fiddle is out of order, and so am I, for that matter.”

His answer caused some surprise.

“Out of order on a night like this!” cried the man who had spoken first. “Why, that is rank treason!”

“If my poor instrument can make amends”—began the harpist; but a sacristan interrupted him brusquely.

“No, no,” said he. “I do not know how it is; I cannot abide the sound of the harp. Maybe it reminds me too much of the sackbut and psaltery and all those dead things of music they talk about in the Bible. A poor, thin, twangling noise it is. I would rather have no music at all than that.”

“And you are right,” said the Englishman. “The harp is only cold metal, that comes from the dark prison of a mine. But the fiddle grew in a great wood. The free winds of heaven blew over it, the free sunshine passed into it; it drank the free rain wept by the clouds, and the soft white snow mixed with its essence. The fiddle for me, any day!”

“Yes, yes; the fiddle!” cried all the rest of the audience.

The fiddler's brows drew together.

"I have told you that the fiddle is out of order," he said grimly. "I cannot oblige the company to-night."

"Play us the National Anthem, and we will let you off, more especially as it is getting late, by the same token," cried he who had first proposed music.

"The National Anthem—yes, the National Anthem!" exclaimed the other voices.

"The National Anthem—yes, the National Anthem!" hiccoughed the tipsy beggar, with a very odd wink. "If he plays the National Anthem, I will give him a gold riksdaler."

"The National Anthem go to the deuce!" said the fiddler.

There was a pause of astonishment, and then indignant murmurs rose among the little group.

"May I ask you to lend me your fiddle for a moment?" said the young Englishman, stepping forward. "I have some little skill, and I can promise not to hurt it. I am curious to try its quality."

The musician consented, with a shrug of the shoulders, and the other took the instrument.

A look of indescribable tenderness came into his eyes, as he fondled the poor, cranky thing, which was, as its owner had stated, to all appearance in the worst condition. He bent his head down to it caressingly, as though to coax a gentler sound from the rough, battered carcase. But he had hardly begun to tune it when he smiled. The tone was pure and sweet.

He played the National Air of Sweden first. The audience rose to its feet and cheered. So absorbed were they, that no one, except the fiddler, remarked the entrance of a dark-browed, gloomy-looking fisherman, who mingled among them unobserved. The shouts had hardly died away, when the tune changed or melted, no one knew how, into the strains of a certain funeral march, that was played throughout the country whenever a great man died. Following so soon upon the note of martial triumph, it sounded intolerably plaintive. It was a subtle, audible rendering of the closeness of two thoughts in every youthful mind—glory and death. There was something womanish in it. Every man began to think of his wife or his mother; it seemed to him that he heard an under-song of women weeping very softly and bitterly.

There were rough, seafaring people among them, superstitious by nature and education. One of these cried out hysterically, "No, no! Not to-night! Play something else!" but he was hushed at once. Two or three slunk away.

Those who were left began to find the room too stuffy and hot, the walls too narrow. The tune was growing—growing—it filled the whole apartment. It beat its wings against the ceiling and dashed itself at the windows. It had caught the unfettered motion of the winds, of which the player had spoken.

No one knew why he left, but there was a general exodus. Hurriedly the guests rose, paid their reckon-

ing, and departed. The beggar, the two musicians, the sailor, and the Englishman were left alone at last.

"Upon my word, *A.!*" said the pretended Englishman, as he handed back the violin to its owner, "you choose strange baggage to tramp about the country with. That is a Stradivarius, or I am very much mistaken. Where did you get it?"

"It belonged to my father and to his father before him. No one has ever touched it since then. Ours is no family for music. Is it of value?"

"You hold three or four hundred pounds at least in your hands."

"I shall sell the instrument at once. Why did you play as you did? It was dangerous."

"That was it not, my son," said the old beggar, "not half so dangerous as your refusal to play. You wear disguises ill. Anyone with half an eye in his head (lucky that no one present had even that limited amount of vision!) could see that you were no more a strolling musician than I am the Grand Turk. Next time you try that sort of thing, you had better appear as an executioner. It suits your cast of countenance."

"The only part that I am fitted to sustain?" said *A.* gravely. "It may be so, perhaps."

Meantime, the others had gathered round the violinist.

"At anyrate, you have succeeded in emptying the

church; and that is, I believe, the first object of a voluntary," laughed *B.*

"You all but drove me out of it, young sir," said the beggar, with the suave flattery of a high-bred gentleman. "May I ask where you acquired such skill?"

A dreamy look came into the young man's eyes.

"In another life," he said, "in another life." Then he roused himself scornfully. "May I ask whether we came here to talk about violins?" he cried.

A. was standing silent, with his back to the mantelpiece, as though it were not worth while to speak again till something of real importance should be mentioned. The beggar grinned from ear to ear.

"I caught your young spark on his way from the Black House," he said, "and I spoke to him words that he will remember. We do not forget the first we hear, when we are only just conscious that we have not spoken our last. As you had neglected to make sure of him in one way, I made sure of him in another. He will be one of us by-and-by. But why did you let him go? I would not have done so for all that I possess. He has saved the King twice, if not three times since, to my certain knowledge. It was he who brought half Dalecarlia to the rescue at Mora. Without that, Adonis could not have risked the march on Gothenburg. And, if he had not ridden hither at the imminent risk of his own life, Gothenburg would have fallen before ever Adonis entered the gates of it. Why

did you let him go, I say?" and he struck his crutch on the floor, and peered up into *A.*'s face with his keen, red little eyes.

"He is dangerous to the King," said *A.* slowly. "Noorna Arfridson has declared it. We cannot afford to kill the King's danger."

The beggar raised his eyebrows.

"I thought that title belonged alone to you," he said expressively.

"It does. But henceforth he is part of me. He bears it also. I shield him as I shield myself."

"He is hand and glove with the King at present," observed one of the others. "What makes you think that he will ever be one of us?"

"The very fact that he is hand and glove with the King at present," rejoined the beggar. "How long will that last? Look at *D.*! He was the King's best friend once; each has better friends now."

"True."

"Besides, the King has been afraid of that young man for some time past. I have observed it. I did not know the reason. If this report of Noorna Arfridson be founded on fact, it explains all. The King has great confidence in her. He will lose his trust in Ribbing, and very shortly too. One need not be a great prophet to foretell so much. The young man has a quick, sensitive nature, and he will resent it. I shall be the last to tell him that Noorna hated his mother, for more reasons than one. And we shall reap the

benefit. Luck favours us in another way also. The Duke of Sudermania had a fall from his horse at Mora, one night, and Ribbing caught him in his arms, and kept him from cracking his skull on the spot. I whispered a word in his ear then, and he will remember it. If the Duke becomes one of us eventually—the wind is setting in that direction—he may do much for a man who saved that twopenny life of his; he thinks far more of such a benefit than does Adonis. The boy is well worth winning. We must detach him from the Court, if possible. You agree with me there, do you not?”

“It is a matter of indifference,” said *A.* “He will go where his fate leads him; we have no call to interfere. If the boy is to be one of us, he will be one of us at the appointed hour—no earlier, no later. If not, we strive in vain. I agree with you so far as to consider it right that we should keep a watch on his movements.”

“We might do better yet,” said the beggar. “As to the prophecy, that, saving your presence, is all rubbish. He may be the King’s enemy in time to come. I do not deny it. But for the present, it is evident that he is the King’s valued friend, and his courage and his eloquence give him a certain amount of power. The King is sending him to France to-morrow. That gives us one more chance. It is a long way from Gothenburg to Paris. Supposing he never got there?”

“No, no!” cried *D.* impetuously. He, at the in-

stigation of his chief, had saved Adolf on the night of the explosion, but no one else knew. "We have tried that, and it failed. Do not let us try it again."

"It might be well worth trying, nevertheless."

"Oh no, no! Let me go after him to Paris. I will watch him. I will see that he does nothing against our interests. Let me go, *A.*!"

The leader raised his hand, as though to silence both.

"The time is gone by for taking violent measures," he said, turning to the beggar. "What is not done when the clock strikes the hour cannot be done throughout eternity. Apart from this, if the boy goes to Paris, it must be in the company of Axel Fersen, who is starting to-morrow. I owe him nothing—he is a mere Court spaniel; but I have a great regard for his father, who has never ceased to oppose the King. I could not consent to endanger the life of that man's son; and if we did not kill both, we should kill neither. I mention this, not because it is of any validity, but because your faith is weak, and you lean upon reason."

"What motive has Adonis for sending him to Paris?" asked *C.*

A. shrugged his shoulders.

"I can enlighten you on that point," said the beggar. "Count Ribbing loves his cousin Tala, the daughter of the Three Water-Lilies. Baron Essen loves her too; but there is a difficulty about that. The two cousins spent a night together out on the hill. Ha, ha! I saw

the way the wind blew. I warned Baron Essen (I thought that he might have become one of us at the time; but, so far as I can see, he has returned to his old allegiance), and he went after them. Now both the lovers have besieged the King; and, I take it, he is going to give Essen the preference and send Ribbing to Paris, on some embassy of the highest importance, to learn to fall in love with somebody else—*Madame Capet*, perhaps, if Fersen will allow it. Ah, well! There are many fair ladies in Paris, and they are not all of one way of thinking. It is easy to forget what one has learnt there. He might do worse, from our point of view?" and the speaker looked meaningly at *A*.

A's indifferent manner had fallen off him like a cloak, and he was listening with deep attention. "That secures him to us," he said, in a low, musing tone, as he fingered the branch of coral on his watch-chain. "Count Ribbing is not the man to forget lightly." He turned to *D*. "Find out the route he takes, and follow him at a safe distance. Send your letters to the address you know of at Stockholm. I do not care to hear about the society he frequents; but if he should be in any danger, or if you should note any marked change in his opinions of which it would be possible to take advantage, send me word at once, and do your utmost to protect and encourage him. For the rest of you—remember that you must be back in time for the summoning of the Riksdag, whenever that takes place. According to the latest advices, it will not come off

much before February; but we must all be in Stockholm at that time, to guard against the possibility of another *coup d'état*. You, *D.*, had better sleep here to-night. Give Ribbing a start of two or three hours to-morrow morning. You can easily make out his arrangements from his groom, who lodges in the next house. The rest of us must seek other quarters. Good-night, gentlemen!"

He strode out of the room without another word, and the rest went obediently, taking different directions.

D. sat half dreaming in his chair for a long while after they had left him. He still heard the music that his fingers had made; he would have given all the deeds that ever were done to have written one bar of it.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE TWO QUEENS.

"I BEGIN to think that you are a human being after all, Axel," said Ribbing, with a laugh.

And Fersen smiled. He was another man since they had left the city of towers behind them. Adolf became convinced that Paris was the home of the lady who had given him the blue pocket-book.

As for himself, he was happy enough. The King had promised that all should go well. All would go well, of course.

One cloud alone darkened the horizon. Anxiety concerning the fate of her son, during the siege of Gothenburg, had brought on a serious illness, from which his mother never quite recovered. She wrote to him still, but her letters were vague and rambling, and he could not rely on the information which they contained.

The cold grew more and more intense every day. Such a winter as was now drawing on had never been known in France within the memory of man. The people were without food, without fire. Not that this mattered much to Adolf, who enjoyed sharp frosts; beyond a little idle pity, he did not concern himself.

The first view of Paris excited him greatly, and his interest quickened rather than decreased as he entered more and more into the feverish life of the place. To him, as to young men since, the mere fact of existence in that stimulating atmosphere was as full of interest as a voyage over unknown seas.

We cannot follow him in this part of his story; there are too many cross-currents. The silent, heroic influence of Fersen waned almost invisibly before that of a woman who left her mark on the age. Every part of life became complicated. Among the many things that changed in him about this time two only remained steadfast—his feeling for his cousin and for the King.

Not that there was any break with Axel—far from it!—but Ribbing had learnt to talk, and the exercise of this new-found art became indispensable. If he was not talking, he was listening to music or assisting at the first nights of plays. He went ardently to the opera, heard sweet Rosalie Dugazon in Dalayrac's *Nina* and Grétry's *Comte d'Albert*, and was ready to kill anyone who asserted that Piccinni was a greater musician than Gluck; in those days, there were many who did assert it. He found more to criticise at the theatre, for he was an eager student of Jean Jacques Rousseau (on whom Fersen looked with distrust) and a Romanticist before the romantic movement. It pleased him not a little to think that he was very superior to other young men about him, who saw nothing to object to in the

fact that Cornelia wore rouge—as she does to this hour—and Seneca a powdered *queue* and Brutus a *panier*. He kept, in after years, one ever-delightful memory of lovely, laughter-loving Molé-Raymond of the *Comédie Française*, as he once saw her, not on the boards, but running along the street because she was late for rehearsal, her curly hair tossed flying down her back, a great hat with a waving feather set sideways on her head, the ends of her muslin *fichu* fluttering behind her, and her pretty hands hidden by a huge muff, the fur of which quivered and shook in the wind.

At the suggestion of the lady aforesaid, he became a fervent reader of many works, the names of which had never attracted him before. He got Addison's *Cato* by heart, studied Plutarch, Cicero, Tacitus, and fancied himself much consoled by the heroes of antiquity for the disastrous dulness of the political period in which his lot had been cast; for of course there were no public men worth speaking of in Paris at that time—except Monsieur Necker. He reflected deeply over *Emile*, and drew up an elaborate scheme of education for his future children. He became enamoured of Richardson's novels, and shed burning tears over the fate of Clementina in *Sir Charles Grandison*. As for *Paul et Virginie*, it seemed to him that nothing so exquisite had ever been devised. *Sophie, ou les Sentiments Sacrés* delighted him beyond expression. He lingered long in that enchanted English garden, within sight of the urn surrounded by cypress trees; and the

word *death*, which had been as a trumpet in his ears, became an Æolian harp. He was nothing if he was not *l'homme sensible*. He burnt all his poems, and analysed all his feelings over again in prose; many and many an hour did he devote to the composition of elaborate portraits and eulogies of Tala, in which there was nothing whatever about her person, but a great deal about the generosity of her soul and the *fêtes* which she provided for the children on her father's estate. Axel, as we have seen, read very little and wrote nothing except a diary; there was an alarming want of sensibility about Axel.

Horse-racing, which was then a passion with many of his acquaintances, did not attract Adolf Ribbing. Luck was always on his side; if he made a bet, he won it invariably. There was no excitement about that, so he gave it up. He acquitted himself well at billiards, whist, Boston, tric-trac, quinze, and many other games in vogue at the time. Wherever he went people complained very much of the triviality of the age. They did not guess—how should they?—that the New Year's Day of 1789 was ushering in a year unlike the old indeed.

On the very first morning after Count Ribbing's arrival, Fersen announced that he meant to take him to dine with the Swedish ambassadress, Madame de Staël, in the rue de Bac. Of the Swedish ambassador nobody ever spoke; he was *tout bonnement le mari de sa femme*.

The cold was piercing. The Seine had long been frozen over, slender icicles hung tapering from every window of the Tuileries and the Louvre. The weather even forced itself on the attention of those fine ladies and gentlemen whose minds were mainly occupied with matters of less ephemeral importance. It was not often discussed in that house which its admirers called "the temple of Apollo," but on the night in question "Zulmé" was not there to forbid the subject. Axel and Adolf Ribbing, who had been trained in Courts and knew that punctuality is the politeness of kings, arrived to the minute; they were welcomed by the Baron de Staël, who at once apologised for the absence of his wife.

"She is suffering from the cold," he said, taking them both into his confidence, in the affable manner which made him so great a favourite at the French Court. "She did not go to dress so soon as usual on that account," and he glanced nervously towards the door.

They were standing in Zulmé's favourite boudoir. It was not a large apartment, but so pretty and bright that the eye rested with pleasure on every detail. The flat whiteness of the unstained walls, illuminated as they were by hundreds of small wax candles in gilt sconces, might perhaps have appeared too glaring but for the relief afforded by numerous pink-cheeked, pink-footed infant Cupids, fluttering, dancing, throwing wreaths of roses over each other. A gaily gilt bracket held a little foolish china clock, that made Adolf smile; it had the

sun, the moon, and the stars underneath its ordinary face, and yet it was not the kind of clock that could by any manner of means understand astronomy; the moon was wrong, of course, and that luminary seemed to be winking. Over the mantelpiece hung a resplendent mirror in a gilt frame. The floor was polished till it shone. Very small tables on very tall spindle legs stood all about. It looked like a lady's room, Adolf said to himself. The Baron glanced at the door again. The Abbé Barthélemy was announced.

Le Voyage du jeune Anarcharsis was, at that time, in everyone's mouth, and Adolf looked with interest at the man who had persuaded the modern Parisian that he was just like the ancient Athenian. There was nothing particularly Greek, or particularly Gallic either, about him. He rather resembled one of the tight, buttoned-up Germans whom Adolf had seen in Berlin. The moments hurried by, and still no hostess appeared. The Baron consulted the clock, quite openly this time. The Count de Clermont-Tonnerre was announced.

His vivid rhetorical manner contrasted strongly with that of the abbé. He began to talk immediately about the foolishness of supposing that it is disgraceful to be hanged. It was no more disgraceful to be hanged than it was to contract a debt and then pay it; the man who had given society either his money or his life, in return for certain benefits received, had given it all that he could, and was to be respected accordingly. Adolf had a shrewd suspicion that this conversation wearied de

Staël; he was listening to it with half an ear, while with an ear and a half he listened for his wife's footsteps. And still they did not come. Monsieur de Chamfort was announced.

The only thing Adolf noticed about this gentleman was that he was not at all noticeable. He began to wonder whether no ladies were coming, and to await, with some curiosity, the appearance of the mistress of the house. De Staël looked at the clock—then piteously at the door again, as if the action of the hands ought to have had some effect on it. This fussiness, well controlled though it was, annoyed Ribbing, and made him take the part of the priestess of Apollo, before she descended. Monsieur de Marmontel was announced.

He brought with him a new silver snuff-box, a present from the charming Princesse de Lamballe. The other guests came round him to admire it, and began to talk about the current value of silver. Adolf, who was not so well instructed in the subject as Axel appeared to be, had leisure to remark the growing irritation of the ambassador, and to excite himself still further on behalf of the brilliant girl, whose *Lettres sur Jean-Jacques Rousseau* had recently attracted so much attention. Still, he was getting hungry,—the fact is not to be denied,—and how long these favourable sentiments would have lasted it is impossible to say, had not the door been suddenly flung open, and something, that at first he took to be a rush of all the winds of heaven,

and then perceived to be a woman, blown up to him and greeted him with effusion.

The effect of this impulsive entrance was as magical as it was instantaneous. The atmosphere, which had been stuffy and close, changed at once. The listless talking ceased. Everyone crowded round her, everyone seemed to have found his centre—everyone, that is, excepting Axel, who never changed his position, and Monsieur de Staël, who said, in a low, flurried voice, “You have come downstairs too quickly, my love. You are out of breath, and you have torn the lace on your skirt, look!”

“Ah, well!” she said, laughing, “it is no great matter, my friend. Our guests will pardon me; we love better those we forgive. I have such long sight, I can see what is going to happen in a hundred years’ time—but not the flounce of my dress. Unlucky flounce that it is! It tore itself when I was making the last of my three curtseys to the Queen on the day of my presentation. I was never so frightened in all my life.”

“And what did your present Majesty do, if I may be so bold as to ask?” said Monsieur de Marmontel, with an appearance of great interest.

“I have not the least idea. Where is the woman who knows what she is doing at the most important moments of her life? I am sure I did not know what I was doing when I married you, Erich. The Baroness Oberkirch, who is as spiteful as six cats put together, declared that I was exceedingly awkward—which makes

me think that my conduct must have been really graceful. The Queen was very kind; she sent for her own maid to sew up my dress again, and the King said, 'If you have not confidence in us, you can have it in no one.' Ah, the dinner is served! Monsieur de Fersen, may I ask you to lend me your arm? You left the King of Sweden well, I hope? I have an old grudge against you, for keeping me so long without the sketches which he desired you to send. You see that I have hung them in the place of honour? But, as I told His Majesty, I have looked in vain for the palace."

"I am afraid, madame, it is not represented in the drawings which I had the honour to forward to you," said Axel stiffly. "They show the agricultural improvements carried out by His Majesty."

"Is it colder up in the north than it is here?" asked Madame de Staël, turning to Adolf, who sat on her left hand. "It is stupid to talk about what everyone talks about, but when things come to such a pass, they are not things any more, they are people. I hate the frost as if it were the Comte d'Artois. I have been ill from the cold all day. It makes me sick to walk in it, and yet I cannot stay at home. But it is not myself I think of. The babies are frozen to death in their cradles,"—she paused a moment, and the tears rose to her large, black, confident eyes, for she had lost her eldest child (a little girl named after Gustav of Sweden) but a few months before,—“the people are starving—they come

crowding into Paris from every quarter. In Normandy, above all, the distress is terrible."

"There are forty thousand workmen, and nothing for them to work at, I hear," said Marmontel, holding his snuff-box to the light, to catch the reflections on its surface.

"Forty thousand!" She made her large eyes larger still. "Ah, well! the fierceness of the storm shows the true captain. Where would they be now, if it were not for my father? Where would they be, I ask you? He intends to make the provisioning of Paris the great work of his life; he told me so himself only yesterday. He is about to stop the export of grain; he is importing it from America. The *Notables* are to assemble again, we hear, the *Seven Bureaus* and all. What will the *Notables* do? Bah, it is my father who will do everything! What it must be, to stand, as he does, between starvation and a whole realm of the starving! Food for the mind, did you say? Ah yes! You have read his *Importance of Religious Ideas*, of course, Monsieur de Ribbing? No? Well, then, I will tell you all about it, when we have fed our bodies! Will you not take some *potage cultivateur*, Monsieur de Fersen? We are nothing if not agricultural, you perceive. We are as agricultural as the King of Sweden. Monsieur de Rivarol opposes my father's book. He thinks we are religious only from interest. Never, never in all my life shall I be converted to such a baseness as that! I hold with my dear father—you cannot build the palace of the virtues on the foundation

of nothing at all. You might as well say that a king who has but his own interests at heart will rule his people better than the king who is ready to give life itself, if that would conduce to their welfare. You, Monsieur de Ribbing, have such a king; there is nothing that he would not do for his subjects."

"You do not know how truly you speak, madame!" cried Adolf, his eyes shining, as the vision of Gustav's entry into Gothenburg rose before him. In a few brief words he made her see it. She seemed to grasp every thought, every image, before it shaped itself on his lips; he saw her glorious eyes one moment lit with fire—the next, suffused and veiled.

"But that is truly magnificent," she said, in ringing tones. "Oh, to have seen such a man, at such a moment as that! The world is full of heroes, if you like; but it is unheroic. Is it not half a pity that he was left alive? Where will he find again such a royal death? No, he will die in his bed, as if he were you or I, or any other common mortal."

"But you are not a common mortal, my love," observed de Staël mildly. "No one could say so."

The fatuousness of the remark baffled her for an instant. For the first and only time during his long friendship with her, Adolf noticed that she was at a loss for an answer. Not thinking it worth while to make one, however, she went straight on, as if she had not been interrupted.

"Why must we die alike? Death is no king; I am

very certain of that. He is a rank Republican. He will not even give us tears of a different colour. If your king were dead and I wept for him, my tears would look just the same as those which I should shed, if I were capable of crying over my torn lace flounce. (How my friend, at the other end of the table, wishes I were!) But the tears that we give to such a man should be purple—what do I say?—crimson.”

“Too many crimson tears have been shed for the death of kings already, madame!” said the Count de Clermont-Tonnerre. “Heaven keep you from the fulfilment of your wish!”

“A needless prayer, Monsieur le Comte!” she exclaimed lightly. “There are no events nowadays—except in Sweden. Nothing happens; it comes to pass, that is all. Here am I, an old married woman”—she toyed with the spray of laurel that lay beside her plate—“I have been wedded three times already, if you come to think of it. I proposed to Monsieur Gibbon, when I was ten, because I thought that papa would like to have someone always in the house to talk to him—Monsieur Gibbon had been engaged to mamma, you know; and seven or eight years after, Mr. Pitt proposed to me, and I taught him French and he taught me English for six weeks at Fontainebleau, and we bored each other to extinction, and mamma said I was as good as his wife, and for six weeks I hated mamma—almost—and I cried, oh, how I cried at the thought of going to that detestable, foggy England, where all the women eat

beef and are red! and—where was I? Oh yes! Here am I, an old married woman, and I have never yet seen anything worth seeing. The betrayal of Richardson's *Clarissa* was the only event of my girlhood. It shook me through and through; the solid earth trembled, and my heart with it. But I was young then—I am too old to feel anything like that now."

"It has taken you twenty-three years to grow old, madame," said Marmontel; "it will take you twenty-three more to grow young again."

"And twenty-three more to grow immortal?" she laughed, stretching out her beautiful white arm towards a dish of fruit. "It used to be said that I was always young, but never a child. Let us hope they will say that of me when I have numbered threescore years and ten. What is it, then, to be immortal? Is it to be no longer young, no longer old, no longer any age at all? Is it quite to forget time? Is it"—and off she flew upon an airy quest of definitions into some transcendental space whither Adolf did not attempt to follow her.

His saner instinct told him that she was talking nonsense, but he was dazzled and fascinated. Love—virtue—immortality; these were the themes which he burned to discuss. Axel always fought shy of them, having the most lamentable preference for facts. He himself had avoided them with anyone except Tala, partly because others were not sympathetic, partly from a modest sense that the words were too great to be uttered without an uncomfortable catch of the breath.

Now, to his astonishment, he heard them bandied to and fro, like any other of the mere shuttle-cocks of conversation. Whether he liked it, he hardly knew. He had a general feeling of *remue-ménage*, of someone bustling in and out of all the secret recesses of his existence, turning them topsy-turvy and inside out; but he seemed to have lost his identity, just as everyone else in the room had lost it. They were only parts and parcels of Madame de Staël. Some drowned themselves willingly enough in the ocean of that overwhelming personality,—for himself, so far as he could make out, he enjoyed it,—others rebelled and became stiff like Fersen, or fussy and irritable like his host. It did not seem to matter in the least to the lady herself.

“Nature,” she was saying, when Adolf found his place again in her talk, “nature is never so beautiful as art, and yet art is always leading us back to nature. Why do I wear my own black curls without any powder?” She shook them out, with a bright laugh of defiance. “Because Vigée-Le Brun, when she was painting Madame la Duchesse de Grammont-Caderousse, implored her to give it up. No, no; Franklin and Rousseau are all very well! White muslin and a blue sash look very pretty indeed in print; but women are each other’s books. I happened to see the Duchess one night, when she had not had time to re-arrange her hair after the sitting, before she dined and went on to the theatre. She was an angel. I shall never forget it. No more powder for me, from that day forward!”

“Vigée-Le Brun!” said the abbé. “Ah, it was unlucky that she could not finish her picture of the Queen in time for the opening of the *salon*! You heard what people said when they saw the empty frame! *Voilà le déficit!*”

“Really!” said Madame de Staël. “They will soon say that of the empty frame of Vigée-Le Brun’s own house, I should think. The King told a friend of mine that that Athenian supper of hers cost forty thousand francs.”

“It cost fifteen, madame; I had it from her own lips—fifteen francs, *tout compris*.”

Madame de Staël shrugged her shoulders.

“Bah, how people exaggerate! I heard she served them up a peacock.”

“I am afraid it was nothing more than a chicken and an eel,” said the abbé. “True, they were dressed with Greek sauces, the recipe for which she got straight from *The Young Anacharsis*, and flavoured with wine of Cyprus, which she got straight from an old Etruscan drinking vessel, the gem of Monsieur le Comte de Parois’ collection. Her little girl poured it out for the guests, and the poor gentleman was never in such a fright in any of his seventeen duels. He thought the child would break it.”

“I have been told her rooms are so small that the marshals of France sit on the floor. Is that so?” said Madame de Staël.

“It is indeed. The poor old Marquis de Noailles

was not intended by nature to take so low a place as that assigned him by art, and he found it mighty hard to get up again. I heard from someone who was there that he looked as if he meant to sit on the floor for the rest of his days."

"Charming! Charming!" cried the young ambassadress, as she laughed and clapped her hands. "But we are growing too fond of gossip. Monsieur de Fersen does not approve of it, I know. He is quite right. He thinks that it derogates from the dignity of a marshal of France to sit on the floor. But, in these democratic days, the King is only the first democrat. For my part, though, I care not two figs for grandeur of position; I have always wondered what being humble means. Have you ever felt humble, Monsieur de Ribbing?"

"Only once, madame," said Adolf, "that was when I felt very proud."

She looked at him with more attention than before. Suddenly he knew that she was talking, not to the whole table, but to him alone, and held his breath lest he should miss one of her words.

"I have never been humble; I have never been proud either," she said; "at least—only for my father. He has told me sometimes about his young days. Ah, if only I had been young then—if I had not been his daughter!"

"Poor de Staël!" thought Adolf; and, in a flash,

“Vile de Staël! Why does he not make this magnificent creature happy?”

“You have known what love is, young as you are,” she continued. She paused and sighed. “We must not stay longer at table now. Will you come and see me to-morrow, at four o’clock.”

“With the greatest pleasure, madame.”

“And you will be my friend? Remember, I have never known what it is to be humble and proud both together; but you will tell me?”

“If I could tell you, madame, I should never have known that sentiment.”

Adolf had not intended to speak thus—he had meant to pay an ordinary compliment—but he used to say afterwards, that Madame de Staël was the only woman with whom, if a man once began to speak the truth, he could not stop.

“But you will be my friend?” she said; the fire of the great black eyes quenched all at once, he knew not wherefore.

“To the death, madame!”

“Then let us go.”

Fersen left early, and Adolf was not sorry to go with him. He had had more than enough for one evening. His head ached, his pulses beat feverishly. It was his first experience of a woman of genius, and the overwhelming unlikeness of her to anyone that he had ever come across fatigued while it enchanted him.

"Axel," said he, "Madame de Staël is the most wonderful person in the world."

"What do you mean?" said Axel sleepily.

"Of course," said Adolf, answering the tone rather than the question, "she is a theory, not a woman."

"I prefer women myself; they wear petticoats better."

"But what a queen she is!" cried Adolf enthusiastically. "They were all her subjects, those men. They talked their very best—I never heard such brilliant talk; but she outshone them all."

"I did not think that they had much chance," said Fersen drily. "Personally, I have no great liking for monologue. But our hostess was not at all brilliant to-night. She is not well, I think. She can be really amusing at times, but she repeats herself and talks nonsense. I would not go to see her too often, if I were you. There is nothing so monotonous as everlasting variety."

Adolf laughed.

"How witty you are now, Axel, and I have never seen you so dull as you were *chez Madame l'Ambassadrice*! But you need not be frightened. I admire her—she intoxicates me—I feel as if I had been drinking champagne all the evening. I shall go and see her to-morrow, and the day after that, and the day after that, and the day after that, if she asks me—but if she had been the only woman in the world and I the only

man, I should never have dreamt of making love to her."

"I dreamt of it once—or someone dreamt of it for me," said Axel, with a smile. "I thank my stars that the dream did not come true. Good heavens! she would have driven me mad in a fortnight. You might as well marry a bundle of fireworks. A pretty life she leads poor de Staël! Upon my word, I think the most unfriendly act I ever did him was to withdraw in his favour."

"Where are we going now?" said Adolf, who had just become aware that they were not taking the homeward direction.

"To see the Queen."

"Axel!"

"It is her hour for playing billiards," said Fersen simply, and quickened his steps.

"I will wait for you outside."

"No. I have the *entrée* here, and it is right that you should be introduced. The King wished it."

Adolf made no further remonstrance.

The great clock of the palace struck twelve as they entered, but the Queen was not in the billiard-room. One or two people were playing, off and on. The rest stood about, chatting in little groups, and the King was not present. Fersen introduced Adolf to an acquaintance, left them conversing together, and went away, apparently to make inquiries. It struck the newcomer that everyone was very dull. They seemed to

have nothing to talk about. Indeed, they scarcely took the trouble to hide their yawns.

Axel was away some time. Several of the courtiers had withdrawn for the night before he came back again and touched his friend on the shoulder.

"This way!" he said, in a low voice, when he had taken a ceremonious farewell of all the rest. "We are not going home yet. Come this way, and I will explain."

Adolf followed him, shivering, down a long, dim passage that looked as dreary after the light, bright little house in the rue de Bac as the talk of the courtiers had seemed dull after that of Madame de Staël. It opened into a bare antechamber, lit only by a single lamp, placed in one corner.

"Wait for me here!" he said; "I shall not be long. His Royal Highness the Duke of Normandy is ill; he has had a convulsion. The Queen is with him. I am going myself to fetch another physician."

"Is it dangerous?" asked Ribbing, frightened by the agitation of Axel's face and manner.

"I cannot tell. You know how delicate the Dauphin is. If this child—but I will not think it"—and he was gone.

Hour after hour struck on the great clock down below, and still Fersen did not return. Adolf fell asleep at last. He awoke with a start, to find that Axel was gently shaking him.

"What is the matter? You were so long, I"—

"Yes, yes, I know; the physician was out. I had to go to the other end of Paris for him. But the child is better now. The Queen will see us. Come."

"Impossible!" said Adolf. "How can I? It would be the utmost presumption." He glanced at his disordered dress.

"If you will not come," said Fersen, controlling his voice with difficulty, "*I cannot see her to-night.*"

Adolf looked at his friend with a quick fear that he was not quite in his right mind. But Fersen was calm, though deadly pale.

"She is surrounded by enemies," he said.. "They criticise every word spoken in private. For her sake I dare not go, unless I have a witness. Will you come now?"

Adolf made no answer, but rose and went.

Axel, who knew his way about the windings of the palace as a bee knows its way in a hive, took him this time to an apartment which was even less cheerful than the one that he had quitted, inasmuch as there was no light at all, except what came from the corridor through a pane of glass high up in the wall.

"Here!" he whispered, "sit here! Remember, you could hear all that passed. If you will sit on this side, no one will perceive you."

He thrust Adolf down on a hard, wooden arm-chair, surmounted by the royal arms, noiselessly pulled aside a small curtain, which concealed a sort of peep-hole opening into the next room, and withdrew.

Gazing through the peep-hole, Adolf could see the tall, stately figure of a woman sitting by the fire, holding a little child in her arms. There was no other light. One or two maids, who were busy putting linen away in a cupboard, disappeared quietly. The lady by the fire was dressed in crimson velvet, cut low at the neck and trimmed with fur. Her white shoulders gleamed in the ruddy flame. She looked up as Axel entered. He fell on one knee and kissed her hand, but no word was spoken. From time to time the child wailed pitifully, and she tried to still it by moistening its lips from a silver cup, chased curiously, that stood on a small table by her side.

"If your Majesty would give him to me?"—said Axel.

But she shook her head, and rocked the babe to and fro, while she sang—

"Ah, que je fus bien inspirée
Quand je vous reçus dans ma cour!"

It was the sweetest voice that Adolf had ever heard, and in spite of all its sadness—for she sang low and wearily, in part to soothe the child, in part because she was worn out with long watching—there was a touch of irresistible gaiety, which made him laugh while the tears rose to his eyes. The fretful wail ceased, and the babe fell asleep in its mother's arms.

She rose, laid it down softly in its dainty blue and white cradle, and made a sign to Fersen, who took a cedar-wood match from a vase and lighted one of the

four candles on either side of a tall cheval-glass, which stood by the dressing-table. The candle flickered a moment and then went out.

Adolf could see her face now; he forgot everything else in the world. It changed, in some indefinite way, while he was looking.

Axel was about to light the candle again, when she signed to him to try that on the opposite side. He obeyed; but it went out even more quickly than the first. She clutched the table nervously.

He lit a third. This too failed in an instant. She clasped her hands together, and stood watching with strained eyes.

He lit the fourth, but this also was extinguished. Then she sank back into her chair, covering her face with her hands.

"Dearest lady," said Fersen, in a voice which fell on Adolf's ear like some familiar sound in a strange land, "why should it distress you? They all have the same wick; that is why they go out."

She made no answer; her low sobbing broke his heart. If he had stood in Axel's place, he must have thrown himself at her feet. But Axel did nothing of the kind; he pointed to the cradle, and laid his finger on his lips. She rose and held out both hands to him. He held them in his own a full minute—and left her.

Adolf was in no mood to talk, as they found their

way out again through the dark labyrinth. Excess of sympathy held him dumb. He found relief from the over-fulness of his emotions in curious, minute observation.

As they returned home in the gloom of that grey, wintry dawn, the snow was falling, steadily, giddily. It made him think that only when it was snowing could anyone have guessed from his own bodily sensations that the great world was round, was moving round. It was at once fine and thick. He could not follow the descent of the flakes, one by one, for they were much too small, mere motes in a transparent mist of white. They never seemed to touch the earth at all, but to go drifting downwards or sideways through infinite space. Some the wind stuck fantastically on one side of a pillar, a bit of railing, or a chimney. Some the wind carried up, so that the order of things was inverted and it appeared as if the earth were snowing on the sky. There was no sky indeed—nothing but a dull whiteness, seen against which the snow itself looked almost black, though everywhere else his fascinated eyes ached and rebelled against its terrible, unshadowed purity. It filled him with quiet excitement. He could not speak; it seemed as though his senses were confused and he were seeing music. His frame shook, his teeth chattered with cold. A spirit sat singing in his heart. "The Queen! The Queen!" it sang.

"What was that air?" asked Fersen abruptly, as they stood waiting for the night-porter to let them in to their lodging.

"Do not you know?" said Adolf, in some surprise. "The air from *Didon*, of course. I thought everybody knew that." And he began to hum it.

"Ah, que je fus bien inspirée
Quand je vous reçus dans ma cour!"

"No," said Fersen, looking him full in the face, "it was not that."

Adolf saw that there was something he did not understand.

"Very well," he said gravely. "It was not that."

A day or two afterwards, Madame de Staël told him the story of Axel Fersen's first introduction to the Queen, and the remarks that had been made by ill-natured gossips when she sang this song in his presence.

"It was the song that sent de Fersen to America," she said.

Even to Madame de Staël Adolf did not reveal that he had heard it. But to the day of his death, he could never speak of Marie Antoinette without tears in his eyes.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE MESSAGE.

TIME was racing along with the young Count in Paris; with her who was dearest to him it stood still.

The Castle of Carl de Geer was at this season quite deserted. Tala saw no one except her father, and to him she was still a child, whom he never suspected of the treason of growing up. Perhaps it was this which made her shrink from telling him of her visit to Adolf. She had no wish to conceal it, and she could have faced his anger bravely; but she dreaded his laugh, his jesting allusion afterwards. When Adolf came again—when Adolf wrote—she would tell.

Meanwhile, she could hardly have been happier than she was; the joy that is purely fantastic is none the less true for that. Half child, half poet, as nature had made her, she whispered her secret to the fir-trees, and, when the wind rolled through them the sound of the sea that Adolf heard, their answer filled her with delight. Everything reminded her of one whom she never felt to be absent, so long as she was out alone among the hills. The clouds, as they drifted over her

head, were living armies. The wind was her messenger, carrying her love to him, bringing his murmured vows back to her. She was a thousand times more near to him then than she could ever have been in his actual presence.

This was at first. After the news of the relief of Gothenburg reached the Castle, moving even Carl de Geer to stinted admiration, the tremulous yet definite hope that, when Adolf next appeared, he might be led to look upon her cousin with less disfavour, began to take the place of this radiant abstraction. It was only natural that she should long for more distinct tidings; hitherto she had hardly thought it possible that they could reach her. Still as the year went on, as autumn turned rigidly to winter and rain to snow, and neither letter nor message came, the longing grew.

Sometimes she would go and stand by herself on the site of the burnt summer-house, on the Reindeer's Crag, and dream with her eyes open, until she saw the very face of her lover, when she closed them, and heard his very voice. Then she would open them again, to find the dream still visible, still audible. Was the face but air, the voice only wind?

One day, while she was leaning against the flagstaff, deep in one of these trances of vision, it was abruptly broken by the sound of a horse's hoofs down below on the highroad. A sudden impulse seized her; she never doubted that he whom she loved was come.

Without a moment's hesitation, she set off running down the hillside, calling, as she flew along, "Adolf! Adolf!"

She reached the bottom just in time to see the rider as he passed.

It was Baron Essen. He lifted his hat to her.

In a moment all her old hatred of him flared up, as though it had been a fire and his action the match that kindled it. Disappointment was none the less bitter because she had been unreasonably certain. On the contrary, it distressed her far more. Baulked calculation is bad enough, but baulked intuition causes us to doubt all things.

The sun was setting, and she went slowly home, tired and depressed.

In the evening, however, when they had withdrawn to the hall for dessert, she forgot her hostility in her eagerness to hear every detail of the famous siege. She sat listening by her father's side, white with excitement, while Essen described and re-described. He was a good narrator. Scene after scene passed like a living thing between them. At last, over the roar of guns and the smoke—not a moment too soon, not a moment too late—he raised his eyes and found that hers were fixed upon him. He knew the question that they were asking well enough: "What of my cousin? What of Adolf?" He did not answer it.

In Tala's overwrought, excited state of mind, the keen scrutiny of his look was too much for her. As

once or twice before under that gaze, she felt as if she had betrayed herself—answered some question the very terms of which she did not know, and to her own dishonour. Trembling excessively, she rose, hardly knowing what she was about, and made for the door.

“What is the matter?” she heard him say, as if he were a mile off.

The spoken question restored her to herself.

“Nothing,” she said. “The room was hot, that is all. I feel a little faint. I shall return directly.”

Once outside, she blamed her own folly. Why had she been so ridiculous? What was the strange effect which this man produced upon her? She strove in vain to recollect Adolf’s features; instead of them she saw only those fixed and questioning eyes. She would go back, and meet them again. She had but a confused remembrance of his last words. Perhaps he had been speaking of Adolf then—was speaking of him even now. The thought winged her feet.

By the time she reached the hall, one of those curious changes in conversation had taken place which make the unwilling witness of them feel as though an earthquake had violently upset the relations of all things.

She had left two friends, peaceably sitting over their wine; she returned to find them enemies. Her father’s eyes were gleaming fiercely under his rugged brows, as she had never seen them but when he was roused to stern indignation; the Baron’s forehead wore that look of high, quiet, and intense scorn, which had chilled

her blood on the night of Adolf's arrival. Each was apparently so well occupied with the state of his own sensations that neither perceived her return, and she sat down unnoticed.

"You do not believe what you say," cried Carl de Geer.

"I should speak accurately, if I were to say that I had never believed anything else."

"Change the Constitution!" exclaimed the old party leader. "He would not dare. Why, it was his own work, confound him, and, bad as it is, to alter it would mean ruin!"

"He will alter it, nevertheless; and in my opinion he is quite right."

"You have taken office under the Crown, I suppose?" said the old man, with a bitter sneer. "I should have thought that you knew his ways."

"Had the King himself been a Royalist, I should never have taken the opposite side. I saw that the Constitution of 1772 was unworkable. It was far too democratic a measure. The King denied himself the very power to exist. He has found out his mistake by now, and he will remedy it at the approaching Riksdag."

"Do you mean to say that he will turn the Government of Sweden into an absolute monarchy?"

"Yes."

"And you, *you*, Baron Essen, can speak tolerantly of this?"

"I do not tolerate, I approve. It is the only way out of an *impasse*. The King and the Constitution cannot exist together. The Constitution is paper, and the King is a man. We cannot abolish the King, therefore we must abolish the Constitution—the sooner the better."

"Not while I live!"

The Baron slightly shrugged his shoulders.

"There are Four Estates in the Riksdag," he observed. "The nobles only constitute one."

"The clergy will never pass it."

"The archbishop is an old washerwoman. The Bishop of Wexiö is becoming more and more absolute every day, and he is hand-and-glove with the King."

"Pfui! the fellow talks too much. I am not afraid of him."

"What say you to Nordin, then? He never talks at all. He also is hand-and-glove with the King."

"A paltry, under-bred fellow, that had not five dalers in his pocket when he came up to Stockholm!"

"I daresay not. However, he has five hundred thousand now; and his lightest word is obeyed, as if he were the pope. So much for the clergy! The peasants are the King's men always. So are the burgesses. They may make what exertions they please, the nobles cannot secure a majority; and besides, they are bound to make themselves unpopular by defending Hästesko."

"If we can do nothing else, we can resist to the death," said Carl de Geer, his face darkening.

"And then," said Essen, bowing gracefully over his glass, "you may be thankful to have one friend in high places."

Tala held her breath; she had never before heard anyone address her father in this way.

Carl de Geer made no answer for a minute or two; then he replied, somewhat grimly—

"No doubt."

His eyes were not flashing now, they were dull and set.

"If you come to think of it," pursued Essen, with unchanged urbanity, "it is useless to struggle against the King."

"He has the devil's own luck, I grant you that," said de Geer between his teeth.

"When has he ever failed? The nobles tried it in 1772. He was young and inexperienced then, a mere dissipated weakling, as everyone thought. They were powerful; their prestige was so great that they had never been beaten. Who won? The King. Who won upon the brandy question? The King. Who won in the war with Russia—against overwhelming odds too? Why, the King! Who won the other day, at Gothenburg, without generals, without troops, with scarcely a personal attendant? The King."

"And who will lose, when he makes war upon the liberties of his own subjects? Why, the King!" cried de Geer, raising his hand solemnly to heaven.

"He will lose in one case and in one alone," said

the Baron emphatically; "if he dies. He may die, of course."

"Die!" said Carl de Geer. "Yes, die like a dog! I would he might! His death would be the saving of us."

Tala leant forward with a cry.

"Father! Father!"

Both men started.

"You too!" said Carl de Geer. "My child, my only one! I did not know that you were here. Well, you have heard enough to betray me," and, with a smile, he stretched out his hand towards her.

She bent down and kissed it with fervour.

"Why must we always, always go against the King?" She spoke tremblingly. "He has saved us from the Danes. All the people love him. They would do anything for him about here. I know. I have met them upon the mountains and talked to them. Father, if we were all his friends"—

But her voice broke. She had spoken too suddenly of what lay nearest her heart; she seemed to be pleading for Adolf and herself.

"There! there!" said her father gently, "we have had enough of that. I know what it means, to be the King's friend. Happily, you do not, Tala; you never will. But the harsh words frightened her, poor little dove! There was nothing in them. Hate him as I may, as I do, the King's life is as sacred to me as yours, my child. Will that satisfy you?"

"It does not satisfy me," said Baron Essen gravely. "You must understand, sir, that I can no longer remain in a house where such things are said. I quit your roof immediately."

"Sir, you anticipate my dearest wish when you threaten to do so."

"Father!" cried Tala. "You used to love the Baron. He is our guest. And you"—she turned to him—"you know as well as I that he did not mean what he said just now."

A miserable fear oppressed her; she was afraid of Essen's friendship, but she dreaded his enmity past all expression.

"The little one is right," said de Geer, after an awkward pause. Hospitality was one of his first principles, and this Tala knew. Any reflection cast upon it troubled him. "You are my guest, sir; I am sorry that the tidings you brought caused me, for a moment, to forget it."

"It is a very small matter to me, sir, that you should forget that I am your guest. But one thing I must ask you to be kind enough to remember, which is, that I brought you no tidings. It is merely a private conjecture of my own that the King will act in this manner."

De Geer looked up at the ceiling.

"Believe it or not, as you list," continued Essen coldly. "I suppose that I may rely upon the honour

of one whom I counted my friend to keep the matter secret?"

De Geer nodded.

"I have but one thing more to ask before I leave. May I request five minutes' conversation alone with your daughter?"

"I can answer for my daughter, sir, as for myself. She is not in the habit of granting audiences to gentlemen alone."

The implied insult was too much, after all that had gone before. Baron Essen let go his self-control. He played a card that he had not intended to play at this juncture.

"Indeed!" he observed drily. "As I knew that she had granted one to young Count Ribbing, some time since, at midnight, in the summer-house on the Reindeer's Crag, I thought that an older friend might perhaps be allowed to claim the privilege."

"Tala," said de Geer, looking at his daughter in blank amazement, "is this true?"

"What?" said Tala, who had not understood the accusation.

"That you spent the night, or any part of it, alone with Adolf Ribbing, upon the Reindeer's Crag?"

"Yes."

The Baron covered his face with his hands.

Tala looked in bewilderment from one to the other. Essen's astonishment was hardly less than de Geer's. The words had escaped him in an unguarded moment, when he was worn out with the long wrangle, and he

regretted them as soon as they were uttered, expecting instant and angry denial.

For the first time the conviction of her perfect innocence dawned upon him. Tala, she knew not why, breathed more freely.

"Father," she said, "you do not want me to say more?"

Her father made no reply whatever.

Slowly as she stood there by the table, she began to realise what was passing in his mind. She had appeared pale before, but now her lips and cheeks were marble; the only living thing about her was her auburn hair, on which the lamplight fell resplendently. Essen was terrified.

At length the rigid lips parted, and a long sigh came from between them.

"Speak to him!" she said, in a voice so unlike her own that he did not recognise it. It seemed as if the evil thing he had thought her were speaking, not she herself. "I have no mother. You said it. Tell him it is not true."

All that was best, all that was worst in Essen's nature, leapt up at the words.

"Baron de Geer," he said (and Tala started at his voice, because, for the first time, it sounded soft and beautiful), "your daughter is innocent. I made no charge, remember. She has more than justified herself in my eyes. I desire to prove it. If she will do me the honour to accept me, I will make her my wife."

De Geer raised his head, and looked once more at his daughter.

"You hear what he says, Tala. If there is no reason why you should refuse to be an honest man's wife, you will obey my commands and accept him. After your confession he does you great honour."

"I feel it," said Tala, without moving a muscle; "I shall not forget Baron Essen's conduct towards me. I cannot marry him, father."

"Why not?"

"Because of Adolf," she said, a smile flitting across her lips, as though, even at that moment, the utterance of the name made her proud.

De Geer frowned.

"Adolf cared little enough for your reputation when he allowed you to hazard it in that way. Baron Essen asks for your hand at a moment when any other man might well have dropped it. Which is the true lover?"

"It was not Adolf's fault. I went to him," said Tala recklessly. She was beginning to feel that she did not care what anyone thought of her; only she clung with desperation to her own belief in herself.

"We will not discuss it further," said de Geer haughtily. "Whatever happens, Essen, you have earned my warmest gratitude. I shall remember. You wished to speak in private with this wayward girl of mine. I will no longer interrupt you. Good-night."

He rose and moved towards the door.

But Tala sprang to him and laid her hand upon his arm.

Unable to resist, he kissed her hastily, and went out.

"How did you know of it?" she said, turning to Essen, as soon as the door had closed. "Did he—did Adolf tell you?"

The real solution of the enigma did not so much as cross her mind.

Essen made no reply. He had found it prudent before now to leave questioners to answer their own questions—women especially.

"I must tell you everything," Tala went on hurriedly. "If Adolf has trusted you, that means that I trust you too," and she gave him a radiant smile. "It was the night of the dance. He would not come in, you know, because my father was angry. I could not have left him out there in the cold, with nothing to eat; how could I? I took him some food. That was all. I meant to have told my father; I do not know why I did not. I would have trusted you before, but I thought that you were against us. Now I feel sure that you were jesting. You did not know that my father would take it as—as he did. You were provoked because you wanted to speak to me, to tell me something that would help me. Oh, how good, how noble it was of you, when you saw what you had done, to speak to my father in that way!" She blushed. "It made him happy at once; he understood. And now tell me—tell

me. Is it a letter from Adolf?" and she held out her hand.

"I have no letter," said Baron Essen.

"A message from him then?"

"He sent no message."

"One word—one single word? Oh, do not keep it back!"

"I cannot keep back what I have not got," said the Baron.

Her face fell.

"After all, there are other people in the world besides young Count Ribbing."

"Not for me," she said, quite simply.

"The King, for instance."

"What has the King to do with it?"

"Only this much, that he has sent Count Ribbing on a secret mission to France, with Axel Fersen. He charged me to tell you this, in case I should find—as, to my sorrow, I have found—that it was impossible for him to visit this castle in person."

"To France?" said Tala slowly. "But he will write."

"His Majesty asked me further to explain to you, that Count Ribbing, after some demur, had given him a solemn promise that he would not endeavour to communicate with you in any way before his return. It was of the utmost importance that he should go. His whole career may be influenced by his conduct in Paris. The

King wished you to know this. He told Count Ribbing that he would speak to you himself."

"Is that all?"

"To the best of my recollection."

"I do not understand why," said Tala.

"It is simple enough, nevertheless. The King wants to win over Baron de Geer to his way of thinking. Count Ribbing wants to win over the King for his own advancement. His Majesty is well enough affected towards him, but he will not do anything to anger the Baron. If a letter from him fell into your father's hands, as might easily happen, your father, knowing his devotion to the Royal cause, might imagine that he had the King's consent; and you can see for yourself that this would not tend to raise 'the royal charmer' in his estimation. If he wished to rise, Count Ribbing was bound to submit to the King's conditions. He is a very promising young man. His conduct during the siege was admirable."

"My father will not change," said Tala mournfully. "He hates the King more than he loves me."

"I would not make too sure of that. The King's powers of fascination are great, when he wishes to please. Make your father come to Stockholm this winter. Tell him that you wish to go."

Tala shook her head.

"I will try; but it is of no use," she said, with sud-

den dejection. "How did my cousin look when you saw him last?"

"I never saw anyone in better health or spirits."

Tala stood silent. Was this the end of the interview on which she had built so many hopes? Was there nothing more?

"Good-night," she said at last.

All that night the words "To France!" rang like a knell in her ears.

All that night, when thoughts of Ribbing came between him and his sleep, Essen said to himself over and over again, "To France!" and the words were as a marriage bell. He rose before the dawn and went his way, leaving a letter for the Baron.

CHAPTER XXVII.

AT STOCKHOLM.

WHAT it was that Baron Essen wrote to her father Tala never learnt; but de Geer made no further allusions to his proposal nor to her rejection of it, and she set this down to some recommendation which the letter must have contained, and felt grateful, deciding in her own mind that she had wronged Essen before and must now make all the amends that lay in her power. She was generous and enthusiastic by nature; if it was any way possible, admiration was always her first impulse, criticism the last. She rejoiced to feel that she was not afraid of Essen any more; the wind blew more freely, the sun shone brighter for it! In the solitary leisure of her mountain life many a fancy sprang up around the few barren facts of his visit. Soon she came to look upon Essen as an ally whose every word and action must be a veiled benefit. Nevertheless, being at a loss for the motive of Adolf's supposed confidence in him—a confidence which had greatly startled her at first—at a loss also to account for Essen's sudden change of front in politics, she framed a romantic theory to the effect that Adolf had succeeded in enlisting his sympathies on the King's side, and then

trusted him with the knowledge of his own private affairs. She took Essen's insinuation in perfect good faith, believing that he had been provoked into it by her father's refusal to let her speak with him alone—that he had felt almost as surprised and bewildered as she herself at the horrible misinterpretation. If this were so, then his proposal was a mere blind; he knew that she must decline it; he knew at the same time that it would disarm all suspicion. Accordingly, he sacrificed himself and came to her rescue. She had been brought up to have a high regard for chivalry; she thought that he had behaved like a knight of old. Besides, having always heard the King reviled by her father and his friends—by everyone whom she knew, in fact, except Adolf and the peasants—it seemed to her the height of chivalrous conduct to go over to his side, when the whole strength of the class to which Essen belonged was ranged on the other, and in the teeth of this gathering storm about the Constitution. It never struck her that his altered opinions could be of any material advantage to him.

To her no small astonishment and delight, a few weeks later her father proposed, of his own accord, to spend the rest of the winter in Stockholm.

Stockholm was the centre of the Swedish world; she was far more likely to get news of Adolf there than at the Castle. Essen, she recollected, had advised her to go. She would see the King; she would be present during the Riksdag.

So the month of January 1789 found them settled in the beautiful Venice of the North, and life which was not like any that she had known hitherto began for Tala.

She was in a strange position. Surrounded by all the avowed enemies of the Crown, hearing nothing but what was evil of the King, unable, from her youth and inexperience, to contradict what was said, she still clung desperately to her faith in him, still held to the belief that he was right against all the world. The vehement, exaggerated speech of the men and women who frequented her father's house disgusted instead of convincing her.

The high-bred courtesy of manner of the elder Count Fersen was charming, in spite of the violence of his opinions, and, from the first moment that she saw her, she entertained a passionate, girlish admiration for his beautiful niece, Aurora; but she disliked the rest—especially an old, white-haired man called Pechlin, who came oftener than anyone else, and paid her extravagant compliments. His boisterous geniality failed to put her at her ease, and she was haunted by an uncomfortable feeling that he knew far more about her than she would have wished him to know. It surprised her to observe that, although he was deep in all their councils, neither her father nor any friend of the family spoke of him with respect. He had strange ways of getting information, Carl de Geer said once, when she questioned him on the subject.

During the first days of their sojourn she thought of many an innocent plan for the fulfilment of her wishes. The King paid great attention to Baron de Geer. He was invited to Court, asked to the State banquets, cajoled and flattered in every way. Tala hoped much from these meetings; but as time went on her hope grew less and less. Her father, who had confided absolutely in her, whose wont it was to tell her all that happened, maintained a grim, unbroken silence as regarded everything that went on at the palace, and refused to take her to the State ball, alleging as an excuse that the courtiers were all wearing the Polish costume, in deference to the King's ambitious designs upon Poland, and he was too old to change his clothes. The manner in which it was said made Tala drop her entreaties. After that the royal invitations became less frequent, and at last ceased altogether.

But if she did not go to the State ball, she went to many others—and to three or four given by the Duke of Sudermania, the King's brother. His lively little Duchess was a great favourite with all the different parties—even with her brother-in-law, who liked wit wherever he found it; she appeared to be as popular as her husband was the reverse. Tala conceived a great dislike for this person the first moment that she saw him. He complimented her on her beautiful chestnut hair and her brow of marble. All the while he seemed to be trying to see something that he could not quite see, trying to hear something that he was not in-

tended to hear. The expression of his features was dull and thick; they never lighted up, except now and again with a flash of cunning.

"Why does he wear a blue and red uniform?" she asked her father.

"Because he is head of the Ninth Masonic Province and the vicar of Solomon," rejoined de Geer gravely.

"Solomon was not the wisest of men if he dressed like that," said Tala, laughing.

Her father laughed too and patted her cheek.

"But you must speak with more respect of His Royal Highness," he said. "I assure you, my dear, that he is not so foolish as he looks. If he does very little, he has most wonderful dreams."

"Does he talk to everyone about them?" said Tala.

"Yes. Three years ago, he dreamt that a very great friend, Colonel Reuterholm, came into his room, dressed in black, and said, '*Tout est fini.*' Behind him stood the nobles, begging Duke Charles to take the regency and save his country. And so he did—in his dream."

Tala sighed, and wished that her father had not told her the story; she had a strong vein of superstition. She fought against it, knowing Adolf's contempt, but she was often unable to sleep for thinking of Noorna Arfridson's prophecy; and the dream recalled it to her mind. While she was at home she had

seldom been troubled, but here, where the air was thick with plots and conspiracies, it oppressed her like a nightmare.

Her longing for some definite news of Adolf became intensified. She went to routs and assemblies, to the theatre, to the opera—everywhere where she fancied that there was any chance that she might meet somebody who had come from Paris. The capital of France was in a most dangerous state, and things were going from bad to worse there every day. She was assured of this on all sides.

Of the women whom she saw, the only one for whom she cherished a real affection was the gentle, brown-eyed wife of that Colonel Hästesko who was now in prison for his refusal to follow the King to St. Petersburg at the beginning of the Russian campaign. It was the fashion among the so-called "Patriots" to go and see her and condole with her. She, poor lady, understood nothing whatever of politics! she simply worshipped her husband with a love which knew no reason and no restraint. When he was taken from her, she was like a fragment of seaweed torn from its rock. Tala was drawn to her at first by the indifference which repelled her would-be comforters. They were full of suggestions to console her. One offered the loan of her country house. One brought her the works of Molière. One said that she herself, during a period of affliction, had derived great benefit from the use of quinine, and ordered a small bottle of it for her to try. One en-

treated her to go every Friday to hear the archbishop preach. All joined together to abuse the Government and the King—bell, book, and candle. She would not leave Stockholm. She would not read. She could not be induced to take quinine or to enter a place of worship. Gradually most of the good ladies who had been so anxious to assist fell away, one by one, and left her alone. It was of no use, they said. Tala, however, who had not dreamed of being of any use, continued to go, and in time the weak, despairing creature became fondly attached to the girl and clung to her impulsive, unpolitical, practical sympathy—feeling it the more that Tala could seldom express it in words. They were alike in nothing but in their power of absolute, exclusive devotion to one person.

As to the conduct of Colonel Hästesko, and the probable issue of the trial which was about to be held, there were many conflicting opinions. The Court party maintained that he and the officers under him were secretly in the pay of Catherine of Russia—that his mutinous behaviour in the face of the enemy had imperilled the whole country.

De Geer's friends, however, warmly applauded this act of flagrant insubordination. The King, said cunning old white-haired Pechlin, was really ambitious to the verge of madness; only the patriotic resistance of the Colonel had saved Sweden. There would be terrible revelations at the Riksdag.

The country, others declared, was all but bankrupt.

Victory? Yes, if you like, the King had been victorious, but where was the money to come from? Frietzsky, the great Frietzsky, the greatest minister of finance whom the eighteenth century had known, was in despair; so said Count Brahe, the senior peer of the realm, in tones of absolute triumph. Even Frietzsky's credit was almost exhausted. There would be terrible revelations at the Riksdag.

Besides, who was the King that he should accuse his own officers, and shake the very pillars of his throne in the person of the nobles? This was the cuckoo-cry of Count Fersen, Axel's magnificent and stately father, who condescended not to any lower form of accusation.

The King had corrupted even the Church itself. On the door of St. Michael's he, Count Fersen, had seen this text, printed in large red letters under a rude chalk drawing of the three leaders of the Opposition struck to the ground by lightning: *Because they came not to the help of the Lord, to the help of the Lord against the mighty.* Abuse of the first gentlemen in the kingdom was stuck up in every church porch. It was no longer safe to go to the *bourgeois* playhouse even; the most trifling allusions were caught up by the audience and flung in the teeth of their superiors, with hisses and groans. Whose doing was this? Hideous rumours of the proceedings of the Court had gone abroad. There would be terrible revelations at the Riksdag.

Tala listened with silent indignation. Was there no one to say a word on the other side? Where was Adolf? Why did he not come back? The opening of the Riksdag was fixed for the 2nd of February. Surely he would return in time! Baron Essen, who was still at Linköping, her father told her, meant to be present. It seemed to her that, wherever she looked for Adolf, she found Baron Essen.

The sympathy that she needed so much came to her at length from a different quarter.

At a gay supper-party, given by the Duchess of Sudermania on the last evening of January, she happened to sit next to the younger Count Horn, whose father had been one of Gustav's warmest supporters in 1772. He was a great favourite at Court; but his poetry and his music made him extremely popular in other circles besides that of the King. Tala had felt some curiosity,—more especially as she remembered Adolf's praises of him in earlier days,—and she was not disappointed. They began to talk about Gluck's opera of *Iphigénie*, which she had seen for the first time that night.

"Ah, well," he said, with the air of a connoisseur, "they give it even better at the Grand Opéra, of course. I have just come from Paris."

Tala started.

"From Paris? Did you see any of our fellow-countrymen there?"

"One or two. De Staël, for instance, and Adolf Ribbing."

"Adolf Ribbing is my cousin," said Tala, trying so hard to speak as if he were nothing else that her voice sounded cold and harsh. "Can you tell me how he is getting on?"

"Very well indeed. He bids fair to be as popular as his handsome friend, young Count Fersen, in time. But he is too much with Madame de Staël."

"Does he ever speak of coming home?" said Tala abruptly.

Horn shrugged his shoulders.

"Not so far as I know."

"Why do you say that he is too much with Madame de Staël?"

"She is a Republican at heart. I dislike Republican ladies."

"Do you?" said Tala. "All the ladies that I know are Republican—almost all."

"But you are not?" he said quickly.

"No."

"Who made you a Royalist?"

"My cousin."

A light of comprehension passed over Clas Horn's face.

"I am so glad," he said. "I love—I worship the King. I would die for him."

Tala's eyes filled with tears.

"It is a long time since I have heard anyone speak

like that, and it is the way that I speak in my heart," she said.

The other guests were rising from table. In her hurry to overtake them, she dropped her fan. Clas Horn picked it up, and handed it to her with a bow.

"May I come to see you, and we will talk of this again?" he whispered.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE KING AND HIS COUNCILLORS.

CLAS HORN did not confine himself to a single visit. The frankness of Tala's confession—for it was nothing less—had touched and pleased him, and he was quite ready to give her tidings of Adolf Ribbing. They became good friends almost at once. It was from his lips that she heard, for the first time, a full account of the incidents of the siege of Gothenburg.

From him also she learnt the politics of the other side—which was in truth her own—for Count Horn the elder belonged to the Royalist section of the Diet, and the father and son were deeply attached to each other and had no secrets. Clas was given to look at public affairs from the picturesque point of view, but she took little heed of that, being too simple-minded herself to find out that his interest in them was half dramatic, half poetical, and by no means sincere. Indeed, it was not altogether his own fault; Gustav had made a brilliant confusion of thought the fashion amongst the younger men. Once or twice she felt annoyed when her father entered the room, and Clas, instead of up-

holding her in some gallant attempt to support the Government, sat silent, or changed the conversation.

As regarded Carl de Geer, he seemed to take a resolute pleasure in ignoring the difference of opinion between his daughter and himself. To her he was tender and affectionate as he had ever been, but she shuddered when she heard the strong expressions that he used in company with his friends; especially when, from time to time, he threw out a mysterious hint to the effect that he knew of a piece of treason on the King's part, worse than anything that they could imagine.

No one succeeded in fathoming these mystic utterances; no suspicions had been aroused as yet. Listen as she might, she could never hear a single word that led her to think that there was any idea abroad of an impending change in the Constitution. Yet every time she felt as if the secret were imperilled by the bare mention of it.

As the day for the opening of the Riksdag drew nearer and nearer, all Stockholm began to share in the excitement.

Furnished lodgings were provided, at the King's expense, for the peasant deputies, and eating-houses, where they might take their meals gratis. These were the subjects of most unfavourable comment in Carl de Geer's circle.

"An evident bid for the popular vote," said Fersen the elder, in tones of silvery contempt.

"There is no knowing to what lengths the King will go now," muttered old Pechlin.

Tala shivered, and wondered to what lengths he himself was capable of going. She could not bear the old man.

There were clubs for the peasants too—clubs for the clergy—two large clubs for the nobles; but on the very day when the existence of these was officially announced, Carl de Geer gave out that he intended to keep open house for all the poorer members of his class, and they, for the most part, availed themselves of the invitation. He was also instrumental in the formation of a committee of seven, for the practical management of the Opposition, and this committee met, day after day, in Frietzsky's study.

Great agitation was caused by the announcement of the names of the *talmen*, or speakers, of the Four Estates, who were all chosen, as usual, by the King. On the evening when these were made public, de Geer (whose eyesight was not good) asked his daughter to read them out to him.

"The marshal of the Diet, Count Carl Lewenhaupt."

"H'm! Over seventy, and half an idiot at that," said he. "Practically, the King will be marshal of the Diet."

"Dr. Troil, speaker for the clergy."

"No one can count on a fat archbishop. He has

the gout, whenever Church and State are not in accordance. The King will be speaker for the clergy."

"Alderman Anders Lydberg, speaker for the burgesses."

"The mace could not be in the hands of a greater fool. Mark my words, Tala, the burgesses will have no one to lead them! They will vote for the King to a man."

"Olaf Olsson, speaker for the peasants."

"A nobody from Ostrogothland. I never heard his name before to-day. I had to ask who he was. Upon my soul, the King has done well! Practically, he has not appointed a single man capable of opposing him."

Tala laid down the paper and ran away to her own room. She hated all these manoeuvres. Why were they needful? Her father accompanied her to a ball that night; and there she met Clas Horn, who could not say enough in praise of the brilliant wit of the King and his "collection of idiots."

Tala had many deficiencies; one of the worst of them was that she did not know how to laugh to order.

"What is the matter?" said Clas.

"Why does it amuse you?" she cried passionately.

"I see," he cried, stopping short. "You are right."

"No, no," she exclaimed, with even greater vehemence, "I am wrong. I wanted you to tell me that I was wrong. You never do."

And Clas Horn pondered over the strange ways of women.

A few days later, the Session opened with a grand State service at the cathedral, and a sermon from the Bishop of Wexiö, on the text, *Eschew evil, and do good, seek peace, and ensue it.* Carl de Geer, and many another with war in his heart, sat listening grimly, and was candid enough to admire the soothing eloquence of Sweden's most eloquent preacher.

Tala recollected the morning, because, through a mist of hopes, fears, and fancies, she saw the King for the first time, as he rode by. He seemed much bigger than he was. In after days, when her views of his character somewhat changed, she recalled her impression with wonder.

The sermon over, the Four Estates withdrew to their separate hall of assembly.

The three Lower Estates at once agreed to the King's demand for a secret committee. They were full of gratitude to him for the energetic measures which he had taken to stop the war, and their votes were unanimous in favour of an address that should express their sentiments.

Very different was the reception of the King's message in the Riddarhus, where sat the nobles. There, Count Fersen lost no time in proposing that it should be "laid on the table"* and Carl de Geer

* Indefinitely postponed.

seconded his speech by moving that the King be petitioned to proceed summarily against the unknown and anonymous persons who had libelled the nobles and the officers of the Swedish army, and that the three Lower Estates be invited to second this petition.

The debate lasted three days. Violent language was used on both sides. Some members even forgot themselves so far as to draw their swords. The Lower Estates refused to support the Riddarhus. The Riddarhus refused to send delegates to the secret committee.

On the 9th February, the marshal of the Diet, weary of endless procrastination, condescended to entreat the nobles to proceed to the election of these delegates.

Fersen, waiving the appeal aside, continued to insist on the necessity of sending a deputation to the Lower Estates.

The marshal refused to put the motion, declaring that it was against his oath, which bound him to consider the prerogative of the Crown as well as the privileges of the House.

In a moment, howls of rage and fury resounded from every part. Fersen and de Geer were loud in their outcries. Fists were clenched, swords drawn. The frantic members behind urged on those in front of them, and there was a wild rush for the marshal.

“Infamous scoundrel!”

“Death to the traitor!”

Trembling, in his excitement, like the leaf of an aspen, waving his white handkerchief as though it were a banner, Fersen fought his way up to the table behind which Carl Emil Lewenhaupt was standing, and tried in vain to make his voice heard above the tumult.

At length his hoarse shouts arrested attention.

The motion was put and carried, and the deputation was sent. In vain.

The Lower Estates refused to come to terms. They stood by the King.

Neither the nobles nor the King showed the least sign of yielding.

What the next move would be, who could say?

Still, not a word was breathed as to the change of the Constitution; and Tala herself began to think that the idea was a baseless conjecture of Essen's. She saw his name among the names of forty nobles who witnessed a note by the marshal, in which, with bitter complaints of ill-usage, he appealed to the King against the tyranny of those whom he was set to rule. But Essen did not come to see her. She supposed that he avoided the house on account of her father's views.

A very different sort of man from Clas Horn! He would not be all things to all men; he would not blow hot and cold; he would not serve two masters. The difference caused her to like him better, and the

better she liked him, the more she felt his apparent neglect.

As for the appeal of the marshal, it was most graciously received at Court; but no one, except Tala, felt much surprised to learn that his health failed suddenly at that moment, and he became incapable of presiding. His place was filled by the senior peer, Count Brahe.

Her father was present, as in duty bound, at the famous meeting of the Four Estates in the Rikssaal, when the King and his brothers appeared, surrounded by senators robed in purple and ermine, the King wearing his crown and carrying the silver sceptre of Gustavus Adolphus.

Everyone who heard the magnificent and indignant speech from the throne, noted his high colour—the sword-like gleam of his flashing blue eyes.

“If ever *War* was written on any human countenance, it was written on his,” said Clas Horn, that evening.

Yet, of all those present, he was the only one who retained any pretence of composure.

The tones of his voice were cold as ice, hard as steel, when he called upon Fersen and de Geer by name, commanding them to withdraw, with their fellows, to their own especial hall of assembly, the Riddarhus, there to arrange and themselves conduct a deputation, headed by the first count of the realm, whose mission it should be to apologise to the marshal of the Diet, Carl Emil Lewenhaupt, and to see that the registers of

the factious debates of the 7th and 9th February were erased from the record.

Fersen rose, in extreme agitation, requesting leave to speak.

The King bade him be silent.

Carl de Geer kept his seat.

Gustav struck the table with his sceptre to enforce attention, and once again, using an expression of contempt even more galling than the imperious command, ordered the nobles to retire.

"He told us to leave the room, as if we had been his valets," said Clas Horn, relating the circumstance.

Not one of the nine hundred stirred. Their hands were on the hilts of their swords, their eyes were bent upon Count Fersen.

General Duval attempted to speak. He was on the King's side; but he saw that for once the King had gone too far. He was a soldier, and he knew to what extent troops may be relied on.

Some of the nobles gathered round Count Brahe.

Fersen, however, had the wisdom to see that resistance would be useless and undignified.

"Let us go, gentlemen," he said, giving his hand to the Count.

The rest followed quickly.

In five minutes the King was left alone with the Lower Estates. He thanked them in touching terms for their devotion, and then withdrew, under cover of loud protestations of loyalty.

Meanwhile the nobles, left to themselves in the Rid-darhus, passed a resolution that they "found it impossible to obey His Majesty's gracious command to apologise to the landmarshal."

Brahe placed the document in his hands that afternoon.

Then—in the velvet chamber—the storm burst.

Gustav read aloud, for the first time, the draft of his proposed Act of Union and Security, the provisions of which secured to Sweden a Government which was not far removed in form from the most absolute monarchy.

It came like a thunderclap.

His warmest admirers remained speechless with horror. They separated without coming to any decision.

Tala alone, in the midst of all her anxiety, rejoiced that the mask was off, the game declared at last. Diplomacy seemed to her, in her impetuous youth, only another name for lying.

She had expected that Clas Horn would agree with her, and she was vexed to find that he was agitated and full of gloom. His father, he told her, could no longer conscientiously support the Crown. She became indignant. He assured her that she did not understand the vital principle underlying the whole question; and they parted more coldly than usual. The effect of the interview was to make Tala desire Count Essen's presence still more. He was cool-headed, wise, full of judgment, she said to herself. At a time when no one dreamed

of such things, he had foretold this crisis—he had insisted that the King was right to bring it on.

Next day the archbishop had a bad fit of the gout, and found himself unable to attend the deliberations of the clergy, although he was well enough to go and see the King in the morning. These sudden illnesses were becoming remarkable. Sudden deaths would be the fashion next, somebody said.

Alderman Anders Lydberg, the third out of the four *talmen*, still contrived to retain his health, but he stated that the burgesses would not accept the Act of Security.

The King announced his resolution to submit it to the Estates in congress.

Thereupon, the Lower Estates sent a joint petition, in which they humbly implored him to use his royal authority to “set the Riksdag going again.” He lost no time in assuring them that he regretted the obstruction as sincerely as they did, and was ready to do all that in him lay to “quell the headstrong, and to chastise frowardness.”

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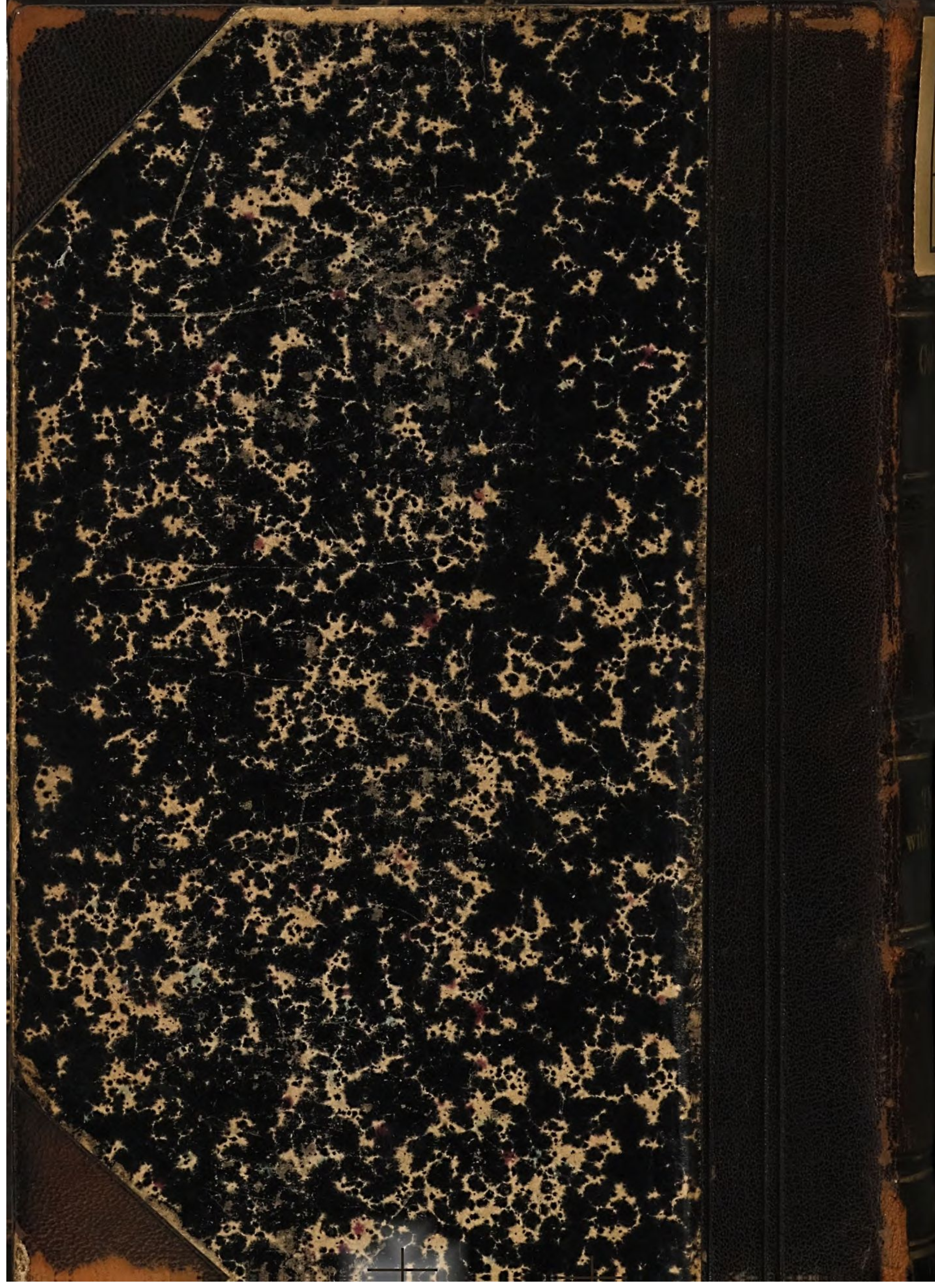
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The king with two faces

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